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VOICEPRINTS

BY

MARY BERNADETTE MCNAMEE. ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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Dr. Kay Stewart

Daphne Read

Dr. Daphne Read

Nasrin Rahimieh

Dr. Nasrin Rahimieh

April 21, 1995

DEDICATION

For Kristen and Marissa, who thawed that frozen portion of my heart.

And for the embracing earth and sky.

ABSTRACT

Voiceprints is a collection of fourteen pieces of autobiographical writing which explore the author's shifting relationship to language by focusing on experiences of loss and recovery of voice. These writings vary in form and style, from prose poems to short stories and personal essays.

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My heart-felt thanks to:

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Lorraine Somers, who teaches me about dignity.

Olga Mangalos, who lends me optimism when I need it.

Karen Williams, who reminds me to trust in life and in the dreams.

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Silent Noise

Our house is full of silent noise. The knock-knock of memories. The buzz of questions that can never be asked. The heavy thud of objections that can never be raised. The howl of stories that can never be told. The roar of desires driven underground: (I feel, I fear, I want, I need). The edgy hum of anything to do with sex. The hiss of being ignored. The pounding beat of livid rage. The thunderclap of disapproval. The screech of self-criticism. The groans of rigid bodies. The snap and crackle of hatred.

I try on words to fill the silence. I thumb frantically through dictionaries, searching for acceptable words, ones that will not offend, that will not invite punishment. I rush through rooms, rummaging through drawers and searching under beds, dragging out the words that hide from me. I sort words into pairs, phrases, sentences, then scoop them up and rearrange them. Over and over, never losing hope of finding that perfect combination of perfect words that will produce a nod, a smile, a sign of approval. I fall into my own words. I slip between them, stuttering. I trip over the ones that don't fit, the ones I never meant to say. I stand mute on the edge of a wide crevasse, my body on one side and the words I long for on the other.

Remembering

I remember when my words always stuck in my throat or lay like lead in the pit of my stomach-- half-formed, shrouded in shame and frightened to death of light. I remember when the words began to rise and swell and push with such insistence that the blood rushed and pounded in my ears, and I started to think if they don't come out I will go mad. I remember when I knew there had to be something more than the chaos of late-night drunken scribblings and the perpetual beginning of uncompleted sentences always forming whenever I washed dishes and waited at stoplights.

I remember when I entered your classroom with my raw fear and my heart racing, hoping no one would actually see me and you looked so tall and strong and your blue eyes flashed from laughter to sorrow and it seemed your bones held you well while I was in perpetual danger of being blown away by any wind. I remember when you said that the things we wrote about were sacred and that all we were seeking was a finer way of saying our words, a rhythm that spoke yes to the listener, and that what you wanted more than anything else was to see our words on paper. It seemed to me the world had suddenly grown larger and was full of seeds.

I remember when you asked me where my words were, why I hadn't given you any writing and I said I was too afraid to put my words before the eyes of any other and you said it

could be anything, you said bring me a grocery list a letter to your mother, you said bring me anything I just want to see your words on paper and I walked away wondering why on earth it mattered so much to you. I remember when I finally gave you the poem called medicine lake-- the one about blood and death and love-- and I still remember the care you took, the gentleness with which you handled those words, the respect you breathed into your comments and your regret that my words were for your eyes only.

I remember when I read that poem out loud in its awkward incompletion in the safety of your warm home, how my heart pounded in my chest and my head threatened to drift away from my body, how my hands shook but my voice stayed strong, how the muscles around my mouth twitched and jumped long after I finished reading and how no one spoke and I could not raise my eyes, full of shame and embarrassment, thinking how could I have done that, now they're all feeling sorry for me, but it wasn't that at all-- they were simply moved, they could feel the pain of it, they were only lost for words.

I remember when it was easier after that to write, to speak, to live through the fear that still fills me when I finish uttering words and how I even got up the courage to send some pieces off to a journal just to know what it was like to send my words out there to have strangers read them, to know that even if my words were rejected I would still

survive intact. I remember when they sent my pieces back and the ones I'd worked so hard on, loved and laboured over so fondly, were not accepted and the only one they wanted was the piece I'd thrown in for padding to make it look like I wrote a lot, the piece called common language, the piece triggered suddenly one night lying in my bathtub thinking of the story beneath all the other stories, thinking of self-mutilation, of that condemnation by others taken inside and inflicted on the body.

I remember how angry I was that they only wanted the piece that had come so easily, the one I had never even revised, the piece I could never read in public, the piece they called quirky, and I stormed around my apartment shouting you want quirky, well I'll give you lots of quirky, I've got a whole lifetime of quirky, and I looked up quirky in the dictionary-- all its definitions and even its etymological roots-- and then I saw that in its origins it wasn't such a negative word and I even thought I might take it as a compliment because the truth was I'd never fit in anywhere anyway.

I remember when I read that piece out loud in a clear strong voice at a launch full of friends and strangers and I began by thanking the trinity of women who encouraged me to write-- Evangeline Eunice and Kay-- without whom I simply would not have been there at that moment in time in that

place and I read it for Marlene Moore-- that most mutilated of all women, now dead-- and I remember that rare feeling of strength and wholeness when I finished and I remember the eyes of women who thanked me afterwards and the eyes of those who avoided me.

And now I remember all the times I've thought and wondered about this gift from one woman to another and this is where language really fails me, how to say what it is you have done for me, how you could have made any place in this world safe enough for me to give public birth to my words, to bring those coloured fragments out of that dark tormenting silence, out of the years of making and unmaking of this body, to give them weight and matter, to free them into the world, to give birth to myself.

The Mother's Eyes

Those eyes were like oceans of cold blue water. Crystal clear water on the verge of becoming ice. Not water gently lapping the shore with a soft tongue, but water lying in wait, with a still fury.

Those eyes were so clear you could see right through to the back of them. If you looked into them too long, you would be swallowed up. You could already feel yourself being pulled in, sucked under, drowned. There was a swirling vortex just beneath the surface.

Those eyes were not a mirror. When sunlight shone on them, it did not bounce back. When you searched those eyes for some relection of yourself, there were only layers of cold blueness. The ocean floor was a flat, bare slate.

Those eyes would darken in a flash, steel themselves. Storms rose up, sharp with lightning that lashed its way through you. You had to look away quickly or you would be smashed to bits.

Those eyes followed you everywhere. Behind doors, out of the house, down the road, across the country. They watched everything you did, took notes, kept accounts. When you fell down, those eyes never even blinked.

A Gift for Burning

At times, I have been cedar, lacy and threatened by too severe temperatures, at times willow, bent weeping over streams and rivers, at times scrub thorn, prickly and harsh, at times elm, diseased and dying... but seldom oak, tall and stately, seldom maple, with free-flowing sweetness, seldom magnolia, lush with blossom, seldom cherry with abundance of fruit.

Once I was wood with a gift for burning, an appetite for living, a hunger for knowing the underside of every leaf, the shifting shade of every forest. I reached too high towards the sun, I cast too dark a shadow. I spread my branches too wide, my roots too deep. I was reduced, pruned, trimmed. Chopped down, cut into manageable lengths, bundled tightly into useful cords. The rest was burned to the ground. My charred stump rose from a pile of ashes, cold and still. Seasons cartwheeled past.

I went to Snaring River to learn from mountain trees, to witness their quiet strength, to see how they rose, tall or short, with grace and dignity, how they swayed in the wind and did not break. I went there to feel the coarseness of their bark upon my cheek, to listen to their whispered tales at night, to learn to recognize their faces.

I went alone to Snaring River to learn how to build a fire, how to bend earthward in search of small twigs, how to

crawl through underbrush gathering up fallen branches, how to arrange my wood in the right pattern, how to remain crouching, patient and persistent, until the flames take hold.

The Family That Prays Together

Everything important begins like this: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Every evening after supper, after the kitchen has been cleared and the dishes washed, dried and put away, we kneel down in the living room to say the Rosary. Every evening, regardless of where we live, we arrange ourselves in the same pattern. We face the ceramic plaque of the Holy Family that hangs above us, always the focal point of this room. The Virgin Mary gazes serenely down at the baby Jesus held lovingly in her arms, while Joseph encircles the two with a protective air. My mother and my older brother Francis kneel closest to the figures, eyes tightly closed, frowns of concentration lining their foreheads. My younger brother Paul and I kneel farther back, eyes wide open and moving, trying to catch sideways glimpses of each other. My father kneels behind us, his eyes always upon Paul and me, so he can make sure we do not lean our bodies against any piece of furniture as a prop. If Paul and I forget ourselves and lean backward to rest our bottoms on the backs of our legs, my father swings his rosary beads out in a huge arc to flick our feet. We bolt upright, startled.

"Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from all evil. Amen."

My earliest memory is of saying the Rosary. I am kneeling on the hardwood floor in the small white bungalow in New Liskeard. I am four years old. Paul is three. We have our own white plastic Rosary beads. We kneel still for twenty minutes during the Rosary. Already we know how to behave, how to stay very still on our knees, how to be silent except when it is our turn to pray out loud. Our family is lucky-- there are five of us and five decades in the Rosary. That means we each get to say a whole decade out loud. A decade is one "Our Father," ten "Hail Mary's," and one "Glory Be." Then you start all over again until you have completed five sets. I am glad that there are more Hail Mary's than any other prayer. The Blessed Virgin Mary is my favourite. I am named after her. My mother tells me that Mary is the most special name a girl can have.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the Fruit of

thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

The Blessed Virgin Mary is kind and gentle. We often call her "Our Lady". We pray to her to ask God or Jesus for things we need. Not things we want to have, like new bicycles or more friends, but things like courage and forgiveness. I ask Mary to ask God to make me good. I prefer not to ask God directly for anything. I am afraid of him. He sees everything I do, and knows everything I am thinking. He disapproves of many things, and becomes terribly angry. Mary is more understanding, so I speak to her. I am very devoted to her. It is a special thing to be devoted to Our Lady. The highest praise my mother ever gives is to say that someone has "a great devotion to Our Lady." This means the person is particularly holy.

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

Glory is like when the sun suddenly breaks through dark clouds and you can actually see the rays of light shining down onto the earth. It will be like that on the Last Day. We do not know when the Last Day will be, so we must always be ready. If I am caught with mortal sins on my soul on the

Last Day, God will send me directly to Hell where I will suffer forever. My catechism book is filled with pictures of people suffering in hell. They are burning up in flames, their bodies twisted and their mouths open screaming, but they never die, so their pain never ends. The flames are not the worst part, though. The greatest torment is knowing you will never see God, never be allowed into heaven. No matter how sorry you are, no matter how long you suffer, it is too late, you will never have another chance.

"The Five Sorrowful Mysteries: The Agony in the Garden, Jesus is Scourged at the Pillar, Jesus is Crowned with Thorns, Jesus Carries His Cross, The Crucifixion."

When we say the Rosary on Tuesdays and Fridays, we are supposed to think about the Sorrowful Mysteries. These Mysteries are dark and terrible, all about the suffering and agony Jesus had to go through because of us. Mysteries are things we cannot really understand, but we think about them anyway. My father announces the name of a Mystery at the beginning of each decade. These Mysteries always go in the same order, you cannot mix them up. You are supposed to contemplate the Mystery while you are saying the prayers of that decade. My father says this means you think about the event while saying the prayer out loud. I never really learn how to do this properly. I can't seem to say one thing while

thinking another. Either I forget what I'm thinking or I lose track of what I'm saying. It is very important not to lose track when I'm saying my decade out loud in front of the whole family. If you stumble over the words, it means you are not paying attention, you are letting your thoughts stray. I pray that my thoughts will not stray when I pray. It is disrespectful to God. It is like putting Jesus back up on the cross and making him go through that terrible agony all over again.

"The Five Glorious Mysteries: The Resurrection, The Ascension into Heaven, The Descent of the Holy Spirit, The Assumption of Our Blessed Lady into Heaven, The Coronation."

We say the Glorious Mysteries every Wednesday and Saturday and Sunday. Glorious Mysteries are not things you can be happy about; they are too important and full of awe for people to go around smiling about them. All of the Glorious Mysteries have to do with rising up toward heaven: Jesus rising up from the dead, then ascending into heaven, Mary rising up into heaven and then being crowned up there. The only exception is the Holy Spirit, who did the reverse, coming down from heaven to enter the Disciples, but we understand that he went back up to heaven again after that. I know that the Glorious Mysteries should mean more to me, but they don't. Maybe it's because I'm not drawn towards

heaven myself. I don't really believe I'm going to end up there; I know I will never be able to be good enough to get in. Even if God did let me in, I'm not sure I'd like it. I'd have to be even more careful to be good up there, and there wouldn't be any animal friends. My mother tells me that I would be so happy up there that I wouldn't want anything else, but I find this hard to believe. And I don't think I'd be very comfortable around God. I don't understand how he would ever be able to forgive me for all the things I'd done wrong. I think he'd still be thinking of those sins every time he looked at me.

"The Five Joyful Mysteries: The Annunciation, The Visitation, The Nativity, The Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple, The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple."

These are my favourite Mysteries, the ones we say every Monday and Thursday. These are the ones where people are smiling, and things turn out well, and you can feel all lit up inside about them. The angel Gabriel visits Mary and tells her she will be the Mother of God. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Jesus is born. Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple. Mary and Joseph lose Jesus and then they find him. All of these Mysteries take place here on earth. All of them are things I can safely picture in my own mind. There is nothing to feel bad about, and no one,

absolutely no one, is suffering. And Mary is there in all of them, gentle and kind and patient.

"Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy! Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning, and weeping in the valley of tears. Turn, then, O most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us, and after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary! Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ."

We end the Rosary with the "Hail, Holy Queen". I say this prayer with great enthusiasm because I love its extreme, dramatic words and the desperation of its plea. But also because it signals the end of the Rosary, freedom from this interminable kneeling and chanting and trying not to let my thoughts stray. When I am old enough to read, I find a way to make the time pass more quickly. I kneel in front of the living room bookcase, which is filled with engineering textbooks, Irish novels, and books on matters of faith. I start at the top left hand corner and read the spine of every book. My head never moves, only my eyes. They travel the length of the three shelves, over and over. Very soon, I am able to recite the title and author of every book in the

case, with my eyes closed. This is a different sort of prayer.

The Rosary is predictable. Except for the difference in the Mysteries from day to day, the Rosary never changes. The Rosary offers words I can be sure of in a world where I never know what the right response is. The Rosary is the only stable pattern in the continual upheaval of our home. No matter where we live, no matter what happens, we will always kneel down at seven o'clock and say the Rosary. We will raise our voices together, the only time we can all speak in one voice, my parents' Irish accents blending with their children's Canadian tones.

By the time I leave home at eighteen, I have said five thousand, four hundred and seventy-five Rosaries. I have said two hundred and sixty-eight thousand, seven hundred and fifty "Hail Mary's". I stop saying the Rosary as soon as I leave home. But I can't completely stop saying the "Hail Mary". Whenever I am frightened, whenever I have to walk down a dark city street alone, the words are automatically in my mind, playing themselves over and over until I reach safety.

When I return to visit my parents, I feel like a hypocrite, kneeling down and saying the Rosary with them only because I'm afraid to say no, afraid of my father's wrath and my mother's stony silence. At some point they finally

realize my heart is no longer in these prayers. After that, we do not kneel down together. My parents say their Rosary in bed before they go to sleep. When my father becomes ill and has to sleep in a separate room, he and my mother still say the Rosary together, calling out the words to each other across the hallway. When my father becomes too ill to speak out loud, my mother kneels beside his bed and says the Rosary for him. He weeps because he can no longer speak the words. She tells him it's all right, that God will understand. She tells him to think the words in his head. From another room, I listen guiltily to my mother's solitary prayer, unable to join in with her, unable to utter the familiar words that were never mine.

Silent Nights

The house is still and quiet. I sit by the open window and look out into the street, and when I tire of that, I go outside and walk slowly through the garden. I have a bed of lilies there that blooms with wild colours. I bend down to inhale their fragrance and suddenly I see Joseph, standing there in front of me, his shy hand outstretched, a half-hopeful smile spreading over his face. Joseph. When we first met, he used to give me lilies. He was never a man for words-- he spoke through quiet gestures, and sometimes with his eyes. He was a good man, my Joseph-- never doubted me, never abandoned me. And he did what was asked of him. When I told him I was pregnant, he was confused and hurt, but after the dream, he just accepted it all in his humble, dutiful way. Even when other men laughed at him and said, "Joseph, wake up, open your eyes!", even when they told him outright that no man worth his salt would believe a wife who said she got pregnant by God, even then, Joseph just shook his head and turned away.

What more could I want? He was so good and kind and sweet and patient and faithful... and even so I used to find myself wishing he was different. Then I'd feel ashamed of myself, and I'd say, "Mary, what's the matter with you?" and then I'd feel guilty and ungrateful and I'd make a vow to

stop thinking like that and I'd promise myself I'd be kinder and more attentive to him.

But that never stopped my wishing. I used to wish he'd get angry once in a while, stop being so patient and understanding and just pound his fist on the table or raise his voice to the rafters or storm out of the room and slam the door. I used to wish he'd turn and face those men that made fun of him, lose his temper and shove one of them, wrestle him to the ground and struggle madly with him down there in the dust.

But all the wishing in the world never changed anything... He thought the world of me, I know. Never complained about anything... it was as if I could do no wrong. I'd catch him staring at me with such adoration that I'd wonder who it was he saw. I wanted to shake him then, hard. I wanted to shout at him, "Joseph! Joseph! Can you see me? Joseph! It's me, Mary!" ... But then I'd feel foolish and the words would lie still and silent in my throat. And that brought out the worst in me. I'd try to start a fight. I'd yell at him for no reason at all. And the more patient and reasonable he was, the angrier I'd get. I wanted to shout my way through all that goodness and niceness. I wanted to wear his patience away right through to the bone. I wanted fire, flames, sparks. I wanted to reach over and grab him and slap the side of his face and scream, "Joseph! Joseph! Where are you? Joseph! can you hear me?"

But I never did any of those things. I kept all that to myself. I became irritable, yes, but mostly I just grew distant. We lived in the same house, but we were as far apart as the sea and the stars.

Early on in my pregnancy, I went to visit Elizabeth and I ended up staying with her for three months. We rejoiced in each other's pregnancies and I helped her around the house and she taught me a lot of things I'd need to know. We talked for hours about the babies we carried and sometimes fell silent with worry over how old Elizabeth was to be having her first child. We laughed and cried over her joy and her pain, and when I held her tiny son in my arms, I longed for Joseph's arms around me and our child.

But when I got home, all I could think of was the child I was carrying and that strange vision of the angel and those words that I could never fully understand. The angel had told me I would bring forth a son, that he would be called "The Son of the Highest" and that his kingdom would have no end. I'd been frightened at first, but there was something in the angel's words, a profound certainty and a solid strength that made me calm. I'd always trusted my dreams and visions, and this time I had such a feeling of inevitability. But I kept wondering, "Why me?" Surely there were other women more pleasing to God. I was full of awe at being chosen, and full of wonder at what lay ahead... It's just as

well I couldn't see down that road... I might have said no instead of yes.

When my time had almost come, Joseph received word that we had to travel to Bethlehem to be counted in the census. The journey was long and hard, and my back ached from the jarring motion of the donkey. When we got there, we could find nowhere to stay but a stable. I looked down at the straw, dismayed, and wondered how "The Son of the Highest" could be born in a place fit only for animals. I began to doubt the angel's words, to mistrust my own memory of them. But that night in the stable, as I lay there so exhausted and full of love, the door opened and shepherds asked if they could come in and pay homage to their Saviour. I didn't want visitors, but Joseph said, "How can we refuse?" So they came in and knelt down and peered at my new-born son. I was proud, but indifferent too. Mostly I worried about the icy draft coming in the door as a stream of shepherds went in and out.

Those shepherds told everyone, they were shouting out in the streets that they'd seen angels coming down from the heavens and that this was Christ the King. Herod went into such a rage that we had to flee and hide while thousands, literally thousands, of young boys were slaughtered... and all on account of the birth of our child. My heart grew very heavy then, and I began to wonder what it was I had agreed to. I couldn't stop weeping for all those other mothers

who'd had their children wrenched from them and butchered before their eyes. My dreams at night echoed with the screams of children and the wails of empty-armed mothers. I watched my own son grow strong, and my delight in him was always edged with sorrow. I wondered why such glory had to come at such a cost.

From the moment he was born, it seemed the boy was leaving me. He belonged to others more than to me, he belonged to some other world whose doors were closed to me. I always had this tearing feeling inside me; he was mine but not mine, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Sometimes I wanted to put my arms around him and hold him forever, I wanted to keep him locked up in the house, I wanted to move away to where no one knew us. I wanted to forget what I knew and take back what I'd said.

Coming back from Jerusalem one year, I suddenly realized the boy wasn't with our group and my heart stopped. We went all the way back, my panic like a wind in my lungs. I ran up the temple steps and my foot froze in the doorway. There he sat in a circle of elders, listening and talking-- this young boy conversing with wise old men as if he'd been doing this all his life. He seemed so at ease, his body loose and his eyes bright, and I wondered what we were to him at all. And all he said was did I not know he had to be about his father's business? What could I say to him about a mother's

fear and panic, about that tearing feeling inside me all the time?

He kept moving farther and farther away from me, without so much as a backward glance. He started travelling and preaching and people began following him. I watched from a distance with awe, this boy become man, telling stories to strangers that soothed their hearts, and it seemed there was no place in the world anymore for a mother's love.

One day I stood outside a temple where he was preaching. I wanted so badly to speak with him, but he wouldn't come out. Someone told him his mother and his brothers were waiting outside and he sent a message back saying, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He said that all these people who gathered around him and did his word were his mothers and his brothers. I felt my knees begin to shake and the sun went black. I, not his mother? I, who'd said yes to the angel and borne him in my own body and laboured hard to deliver him safely? I, who would've given up my life for him? I, not his mother?... But who could I tell about the sting of his words? Everywhere I went, people were in love with him, savouring and swallowing every single word that fell from his lips. I kept my hurt to myself and stored my sorrow in my heart.

He was always surrounded by other people and many of them were women. The women went everywhere with him and took care of him and he listened for long hours to their stories.

There was that other Mary, the one he seemed to like the most. She was everything to him that I used to be, and more. She was younger than me, she could keep up with him, and I saw the way he touched her face and smiled deep into her eyes. I watched the way she moved about the room, so lithe and full of grace, with an ease in front of others I'd never known. She wasn't beautiful, but she outshone everyone in her presence. She opened her eyes on the day with gladness. She smiled in the face of storms. She laughed till tears ran down her face. She could turn pain into a song. I used to watch the two of them sitting close together or walking slowly in the evening. There was no end to what they had to say to each other.

My jealousy stung me like a serpent and its metal venom filled my mouth. Its poison pooled in my throat and I could not speak. I prayed for release, I prayed for forgiveness. I got down on my knees and told God I hadn't understood what it meant to say yes to the angel, that I was only human and that I couldn't carry this much pain. I wanted to lie at the bottom of a vast sea and let waves soothe my lungs. I wanted to forget.

When they told me he'd been arrested, I sank to the ground thinking, "No, not him!", and yet I knew that everything else had been leading up to this moment. I didn't see him again until they led him out, bent and bleeding, dragging that huge cross. Crowds poured after him, jeering

or weeping. I tried to stay as close to him as I could, but everything was noise and confusion, and even the sky looked as if it was tearing itself into pieces. I put one foot in front of the other on that stony path. My body was numb and cold and my mind was like clear water. The worst part was his eyes. Huge pools of pain and love.

Even now there are no words for those last hours. No words big enough to encompass that brutality, no words loud enough to voice his agony. No words strong enough to hold my stricken, shattered heart. There was a black emptiness, a void so vast it swallowed everything that had ever been. It seemed as if the whole world had been abandoned, every act and thought stripped of its meaning forever.

I looked down. His long, manly body draped lifeless across my knees, the flesh and bones still full of grace, but the eyes closed upon the world. I looked towards the hills. A single star moved slowly across the sky, then vanished.

* * * * * * *

After his death, we stumbled through our days and nights, unable to speak of what we'd seen. His friends and I gathered together over uneaten meals and stared into each other's eyes, unbelieving.

Then the day that Mary burst through the door, breathless and blown, her cheeks flushed and her eyes on

fire. She had seen him! The men argued-- it was impossible, she only wanted it to be so.

Mary ran to me, grabbed my two hands and looked deep into my eyes. I knew then, I could see the truth shining there in her face, I could see what she'd seen. We burst out laughing and tears ran down our faces and we threw our arms around each other and the blood flowed through our limbs again and we flung our heads back and shouted and sang for joy and then we grabbed each other's hands again and flew around the room, spinning round and round the astonished men, our eyes on fire with what we knew in our bones.

He came and went, brief visits, moments that taught me he is never really gone, just not always apparent. Even now, when I no longer see him in the flesh, I feel him near me. In moments of stillness, by the fire. In the silent hour before sunrise. In the light of the full moon on the desert sand. Sometimes, when I'm alone, certain things catch my eye, images leap right out of ordinary time and stand still and frozen. A child's rippling laugh. The wind sighing through branches. An old man's steady gaze. The slant of sunlight on ripening fields. Then I feel him again, moving through the world.

Prayer

Prayer formed the envelope in which I was sealed. A square space around me, a thin but solid membrane between me and the world. Ritual words that defined me and through which I defined the world.

Everything began with prayer. Food could not be tasted without first giving thanks. We did not leave the house without blessing ourselves with holy water. Every outing in the family car began with the "Prayer for a Safe Journey". The evening was prefaced with the family Rosary. Beds could not be lain in without first kneeling and requesting help for everyone I knew, living or dead.

The sacraments of the church extended prayer from the privacy of our home out into the world. Every Saturday afternoon, I confessed my sins to the parish priest. There was an established catalogue of sins from which I chose varying selections in order to avoid sounding repetitive. When Paul and I were young, we consulted each other before confession. "What are you going to say this week?" "I told two lies, I disobeyed my parents." When we couldn't remember having sinned that week, we made up sins. You couldn't go into the confessional, kneel down in front of the wooden screen behind which the priest sat shrouded, and say, "Bless me, Father, for I have not sinned." Besides, not being able to remember any sins was no guarantee of not having sinned.

We were first and foremost sinners. That was our primary identity. There were only a chosen few who had not sinned. They were saints who had lived in other countries, in other centuries. Men and women who gladly suffered persecution and torture on account of their faith, dying gruesome deaths with words of prayer on their lips.

When Paul and I grew older and learned about money, we laid bets before confession, predicting what penance we would receive for the assortment of sins we presented. We were not being irreverent; we were simply testing our powers of prediction, our ability to read the priest's mind. We understood that penance was arbitrary. There were no established guidelines for assigning penance; sentencing seemed to depend on the priest's mood. Whether you had disobeyed your parents or lied to your teacher, your penance might be the same. You might receive a different penance from week to week for the same sin. But penance was also predictable in its nature; it always involved more prayer. "Say three Our Father's, five Hail Mary's, and two Glory Be's." Then we were to be magically absolved of our sins. Except it never felt that way. Penance was never as powerful as sin. No amount of penance ever rid me of guilt, no amount of prayer ever alleviated the weight of sin. My sins stayed firmly locked in my memory where I watched myself commit them over and over. My only image of myself was that of a young girl perpetually caught in the act of sinning.

Confession prepared our souls for the sacrament of the Mass, the highest form of communal prayer. We went to Mass on Sundays and religious feast days, on the first Friday of every month and every day during Lent. To miss Mass on Sunday was a mortal sin, the kind you would go to Hell for if you happened to die with one of them on your soul. Until I was nine, the Mass was always said in Latin. I was able to follow the priest's words in my prayer book and could pronounce properly all the congregational responses. I loved this limited familiarity with an ancient language, but I never understood the meaning of what I was saying. Neither was I clear about the details of the Mass as a ritual. The priest kept his back to the congregation and did mysterious things on the altar, speaking in a low voice as if to himself.

Even if I didn't understand the Mass, I loved it with all my heart. I loved the solemnity of it, the carefully-intoned words, the hush of the congregation, the priest's richly embroidered vestments, the sound of bells pealing and the scent of incense burning. The churches we went to were all old, built from stone or brick and lined with wood. Light filtered into the dark interiors through stained-glass windows whose coloured fragments told stories of saints and miracles. The walls were peopled with statues under whose kind and gentle faces I knelt and prayed, searching their eyes in hope of a sign. The church pews were ringed with

wood or plaster Stations of the Cross, those fourteen tableaux of Christ's journey through betrayal, suffering and death. Candles flickered everywhere. Brass stands of row upon row of small vigil lights, left burning for some parishoner's special request or in memory of the dead. Thick beeswax candles in tall wooden holders beside the altar, slender ones grouped around the tabernacle. Overhead hung the red-glassed sanctuary lamp, always left burning as a sign of God's eternal presence.

When I was in Grade Five, the Mass suddenly changed. Pope John XXIII's second Vatican Council blew through the Catholic Church like a hurricane, leaving many traditions crushed in its path. Altars were turned around so that priests faced their congregations during the entire Mass. Vestments became less ornate. Latin disappeared, along with many of the old statues. The communion rails that had always separated the congregation from the altar area were removed. Instead of kneeling at communion to have the host placed upon our thrust-out tongues, we now stood to receive the body of Christ directly into our own hands, no longer forbidden to touch it. Women were no longer required to have something on their heads in order to enter a church.

My father railed against these changes, calling them an abomination. He said the new English version of the Mass was disrespectfully casual in its language. Saying things like "So now, Lord, we come to you" was like saying "So now, Joe,

would you pass me that hammer over there". My mother said that none of this would ever have happened in Ireland, that even if the Pope permitted change, the people there would never give up the things they'd done for centuries, the things they'd held on to so fiercely even in the face of persecution and punishment.

I said nothing. I witnessed the changes in the Mass the way I witnessed upheaval of any sort, with a feeling of helplessness and sorrow. Change always seemed sudden and beyond my control, leaving me speechless and uncertain. I longed for the Mass to return to its former state. I missed the feast the old Mass had been for my senses. My eyes no longer drank up the light of candles and the colours of rich embroidery. My nostrils no longer pinched with the smell of incense. My ears strained to hear the sound of bells. My tongue longed to taste the sounds of an ancient language. I missed the mystery and solemnity of elaborate ritual. It was as if some protective veil had been stripped away from me; I began to faint on the way up to communion, the English words "O Lord, I am not worthy" ringing in my ears.

While the communal worship of the Mass underwent enormous revision, prayer in our home remained markedly unchanged. In addition to all our regular prayers, we often individually recited special prayers that were written on the back of holy cards. Holy cards were small pictures of scenes from the Bible which we gave each other as gifts. Saying the

prescribed prayer on the back of the card guaranteed a certain number of indulgences, which could be accumulated and used to reduce the number of days that some poor soul was having to spend confined in Purgatory. The indulgences could be used for any anonymous soul, or saved towards the early release of one's own soul in the future.

It was not possible to pray too much. Excess was welcomed. We regularly "stormed Heaven's gates," as my mother put it, with Novenas made to Our Lady for the purpose of special requests. A Novena was the repetition, for nine days in a row, of any chosen prayer. My mother made Novenas to assist her with any difficulties she faced, such as finding someone to take over the lease on our rented house before moving day. For lesser requests, she prayed to various saints. Whenever she lost something, she prayed to Saint Jude, the Patron Saint of Lost Objects, and vowed to donate an extra five dollars to the Scarboro Foreign Missions when she recovered the missing item. My father always said that this amounted to bribing the saints, and we all laughed, but my mother paid no attention to us. Her faith in prayer was fierce, and if she ever doubted its efficacy, she never showed it. The uncanny thing was that her Novenas and prayers were always successful: someone would materialize to take over our lease the very morning we moved; the diamond out of her ring would eventually be found stuck in the agitator of the washing machine.

Prayer was magic. If I did not pray, bad things would happen. If I said the right prayers in the right spirit, everything would be fine. Prayer placated the angry male God, the all-powerful father in the sky whose giant hand could strike at any moment. Prayer formed a protective barrier between me and God, kept his wrath at bay, diverted his attention elsewhere. Prayer diminished the power of the Devil to lead me into thoughts, actions, words that would offend God. The bedrock underlying prayer was fear. Fear of God, the Devil, and the world.

Prayer created the perception of being able to exert some degree of personal control in a world where I was seldom allowed any choice. Prayer could improve personal situations, solve problems, smooth one's passage through the world. Prayer could also alter the course of public events, the affairs of nations, the unfolding history of the world. Periodically, prayers aimed at resolving personal difficulties collided with prayers designed to ameliorate political affairs.

When I was thirteen, my favourite Siamese cat disappeared. I spent every afternoon after school tramping through fields and woods, searching for him, calling out to him. I prayed vigorously every night for his safe return. At the same time, everyone I knew was consumed by the drama of the FLQ crisis in Quebec. Pierre Trudeau had invoked the War Measures Act. The Quebec Labour Minister Pierre LaPorte

had been found murdered. The British diplomat James Cross was still missing. The nation was in an uproar. We offered up our evening Rosaries for the safe return of James Cross. Several times a day, my mother would say to me, "Imagine what his family must be going through."

I began to feel guilty. I felt nothing for James Cross and his family. I forced myself to imagine his distraught family clinging fearfully to one another. I saw the man himself in a dark room somewhere, blindfolded with a gun to his head and ransom notes lying in piles around him. But I felt nothing. My only concern was for my lost cat. I knew this was selfish, but I couldn't stop.

One day, as I sat by myself on the schoolbus, I heard a loud voice in my head ask, "Which would you rather have, your cat found alive or James Cross returned safely to his family?" I had always been afraid of being forced into such a terrible decision. I could not answer right away. I thought of Paddy, his sleek brown fur, his patient blue eyes, the way he followed me through fields and leapt like a kangaroo through the tall grass. I saw him coming down the laneway, staggering proudly towards me with a dead rabbit dragging between his legs. I thought of Paddy sitting with me in the barn while I cried, looking up at my face and trying to lick my salty tears.

I prayed all day for the wisdom and strength to make the right decision. My shoulders curved inward with the weight

of having to choose. I knew in my heart that there was only one right answer. No scales in heaven or on earth could balance the worth of a Siamese cat and a British diplomat. That evening, I knelt beside my bed and told God that I would give up Paddy in return for James Cross's safety. Two days later, Cross's relieved face spread across the nation's newspapers. My mother sank to her knees in thanksgiving. "My prayers have been answered," she said. Paddy never returned. I felt mildly heroic, slightly martyred, and kept my secret to myself.

Prayer determined the success or failure of one's passage through the world. Throughout most of elementary school, all of high school and my first two years of university, I firmly believed that my academic success was due to prayer. I prayed for good results on exams and for inspiration in my written assignments. But my strongest insurance lay in the tiny religious symbols I drew on every piece of paper I handed in to every teacher. I turned over pages of exams and essays, projects and presentations, and inscribed the symbols that ensured excellent grades. On the back of every written page, down in the bottom left-hand corner, I drew a tiny cross, so small that it was hardly recognizable. On each of the four arms of the cross, I wrote a tiny letter. The letters circled clockwise, G-B-T-P. A short and direct prayer: God Bless This Paper.

I never imagined that my success in school had anything to do with intelligence or hard work. At home, I knew that I was stupid and that no matter how hard I tried, nothing I did was ever good enough. At school, I was noticed and affirmed because of my good grades. At school, I was pleasing to God and my teachers. God granted me success because I always remembered to put my little symbols on every piece of paper. I honoured His power every time I gave something to a teacher.

In my early twenties, the protective bubble in which prayer had encased me grew thin and finally burst. Prayer betrayed me. It had never shielded me from pain, but I had always believed that if only I prayed more, or prayed with a purer heart, things would go better in the future. I slowly realized that whether I prayed or not, life would carry on with its own brand of brutality, and none of the words I uttered would make any difference. Either way I felt unworthy, either way my demons plagued me. The world was a battlefield and I was fighting the war alone. I abandoned prayer the way it had abandoned me, and sought salvation elsewhere. I left prayer behind me like a lover who'd promised to make everything all right and then failed to keep that promise. Sometimes I would weaken, look wistfully over my shoulder, and hesitate. But I could not go back. I could not trust the old familiar words. I could not force my mouth to speak the words I no longer believed.

Salvation

If I were an evangelical Christian, I would travel from one end of the country to another, shouting out my testimony, telling the nations that I've been saved and am marching on the path to glory. I would tell and retell the story of how I was plucked, at the very last moment, from the black jaws of Satan.

But it is not like that at all. I do not understand how it is that I have survived, or been saved, or why. I could have succeeded with that razor blade. I could have stayed out on the street. I could have pushed that needle too far. I might not have made it out of the locked room. I could have ended up in jail. I could have stayed with the man who hit me. I could have drowned myself in a tight-corked bottle.

But I didn't. And there was no particular moment of awakening, no blinding light, no call from the heavens. No declaration of a desire to live. Maybe just a tiredness, a giving up, a different kind of surrender. And so I am alive.

Alive, but still possessed. Now, when I hear the beauty of the words of others, I feel sick. A seething green envy clots my veins and pushes me into black silence underneath a rock I cannot lift alone. I want to silence others, I want to be the only one with words, with stories.

I want a golden light shining on me alone. I look up, choked and choking. Despair flows through my body, slowly and stealthily, like a secret fog. It draws a veil over each of my senses. Then I long to retreat into that place where I was not required to act or speak, into that darkness where I lived before any words emerged. I want to go back to the days when getting out of bed was a major feat, the days when I could not look further ahead than the next hour.

Life was broken down then into such minute detail, like grains of sand-- scattered, not contained in the hourglass, but strewn upon the ground so that I could gaze at each one separately. In those days I was not required to have any larger vision, to see beyond what lay in my hand. I did not have to consider my future or my purpose in life. I looked at individual threads without noticing that they were long and continuous, knotted and reknotted, woven together into a patterned cloth that lay across the land and stretched out of view beyond the hills. I could go through my days then bent over with a magnifying glass to my eye.

I have been forced out of those days for some reason, forced upright and off my knees, from a slow crawl into a slow walk. Some days the sun blinds me and I yearn not for darkness but a veil of heavy cloud. My feet are heavy and I trip on my shoelaces. I am pushed forward by a steady breeze, as if there are tiny sails under my arms. Sometimes

my hands hang by my side, toying with the loose threads of my clothes. Sometimes my hands reach slowly outwards as if to hold on, to be pulled forward, but there is nothing there, only the branches of small bushes.

I look for signposts but there are only small things: a berry fallen here or there, a stone lying on its back, a stream trying to run in two directions at once. There are hills in my path, which I go around because the thought of climbing them is too tiring and I am afraid of what I might see from the top. At night I pause and press myself against the bark of trees or the side of a hill. I long for an animal to sleep with, a cow perhaps whose coarse tongue could lick my soul calm, or a white horse whose awkward limbs could angle round me, or maybe just a dog who could slowly wash the salt from my face.

In the morning, I wake confused. In the afternoon, I teeter on the edge of a cliff, full of the power I hold in my hands, wavering between staying on the path and throwing myself over the brink. I tell myself it doesn't matter. If I fall and crash, I know how to gather up the scattered, bruised fragments, how to spend my days gluing them back together in some semblance of the original order. I know how to do this all too well. It gives an immediate urgency to life. It gives a structure to my days. It keeps me busy making promises to myself. It keeps me from having to look too far ahead, it keeps me from seeing the sun setting.

Mostly it keeps me from having to build my own fire--from the heavy task of searching through underbrush for the right pieces of wood, breaking them into usable lengths and arranging them in the pattern necessary for the fire to light and last.

Inhabiting Houses

I remember my years by the houses I've lived in, small wooden cottages, tall brick highrises, old stone farmhouses. Thirty-two houses in seventeen different places, from one end of the country to the other. My father moved us around like pawns on a chessboard and when I left home, I carried on the tradition. For a long time, I thought it was only the dislocation, the succession of unfamiliar places and the disrupted friendships, that affected me. I thought that the houses themselves were incidental, had had no impact. Until the summer I found myself making pilgrimages to visit all those houses, to see if the ones I couldn't remember looked the same as my invented images of them, to see if the remembered ones matched my memories. I sat across streets from those houses, staring intently, as if waiting for them to explain something to me. Something about who I was, something about how each house connected with the other ones, something about how we all fit together into some kind of pattern.

I took photographs of all the houses left standing, all twenty-three of them. One winter evening, I arranged the photographs in chronological order and glued them in rows to a square of masonite. I clipped a plate of glass on top, as if fixing the images into some kind of stability, some appearance of permanence. I hung the collage in my hallway,

where I studied it every morning when I went out, and every evening when I returned home. I brought back to memory the floor plan of each house. I remembered long-forgotten rooms. I retraced the paths I would have followed from door to kitchen to bathroom to bedroom.

A few years later, I learned that social workers often ask adolescents who have spent their lives being moved through a series of foster homes to create similar collages, drawing pictures of their many homes if no photographs are available. The collage itself is apparently not enough; the adolescents are asked to remember each room in the house, and where it lay in relation to other rooms. As the youths trace their journeys through these houses, they tell themselves the story of each physical house and what happened within its walls. They do this to mend their fragmented lives.

My dwelling-places have shaped me, their walls have built mine, and their rooms have multiplied within me. I often dream about houses, always old, often decrepit, sometimes empty and sometimes so filled with other residents that there is barely room for me. I dream of searching for the right house, of moving into houses that seem wonderful, but later prove to be leaky, noisy, or full of insects. Once I dreamed of moving into a beautiful house, old and restored, whose rooms were exquisite with a beauty that moved me beyond

speech. The light in that house was unlike any light I'd ever seen.

My houses inhabit me. But the one in Kingston haunts me. It was a house filled with images. They clung to the eaves, slid down the wide stairs, and stood stacked in doorways. Vivid mages from the house's past, images of unnatural excess, images of strict confinement. Those images still bombard me with their sheer weight. Everything that happened in that house was sharp-edged and permanent, even though we lived there less than a year.

The house in Kingston was a massive limestone building which stood alone on a square of fields surrounded by sleek suburbs. There was no mail delivery to our address. The only person who ever knocked on that front door was a man who had escaped from the nearby psychiatric hospital. He stood there in his pyjamas and slippers, blinking, and told me he had come to get the rats out from underneath his grandmother's bed.

That house was said to be haunted. At school, on my first day as a new and out-of-place grade seven student, the teacher asked me where I lived. I said without thinking, "In the old prison farmhouse," for that was how the house was known. I can still hear the silence that fell upon the classroom, can still see the sudden shock on young faces, the quick looks exchanged, and most of all, the pity on my teacher's face. That year, I had no friends.

That house was built by convict hands, by men from another century incarcerated in the nation's first federal prison, for crimes probably far less hideous than what I then imagined. Some of the men, no doubt, were innocent. They laboured with strong and failing backs to heave the huge limestone foundation blocks into place, and later on, some of them would be confined there in the solid basement. My older brother, Francis, swept that underground dirt floor, whitewashed the walls and spent winter evenings painting them with scenes from Gilbert and Sullivan. I could hear him singing, the notes drifting up the winding wrought-iron railed staircase.

That house had not been lived in for twenty years. It was in a state of ruin, but my father had been smitten by its possibilities. He was always drawn to houses with character. Their condition did not matter; we would clear away debris, sand floors, repair walls and cover their flaws with tasteful wallpaper. Perhaps my father had vision, some sorrow-filled image of how a house must once have been, and felt some obligation to restore its dignity, to bring it back into life. But the old prison farm-house was so far gone that for the first time in my life, I saw a look of defeat on my mother's face.

The prison had sold the land and the house to Queen's University just before we arrived. Queen's had been using the kitchen for animal science experiments, and the ceiling

was covered with fluorescent lights which cast no shadows. Nobody but me seemed to notice that it was too bright in there, and if anyone else felt like they were eating at an operating table, no one ever mentioned it. Outside, the wooden back door was carved with the claws of dogs long gone, some of the marks reaching as high as my father's head. The old dairy off the kitchen reeked of animal urine; the smell was in the walls, my mother said. A procession of experts failed to provide a cure, so we finally gave up and nailed the door shut.

That house was infested with huge feathery centipedes. They darted unexpectedly across floors and walls, shimmering multi-coloured when caught by the sun. The centipedes kept me tense and vigilant. At night, I lay in bed praying they would not run over my face. In the morning, I checked the floor carefully before lowering my bare feet. My younger brother, Paul, was less perturbed. He lay on his bed with a stack of paperbacks, waiting for the creatures to appear. His aim steadily improved.

Outside, generations of pigeons nesting in the eaves had deposited enormous mounds of droppings onto the ground. My mother assigned me the task of removing the hardened piles. I knelt dismayed beside them, holding a small shovel, while my Scottish godfather stood above me waving his hands and shouting, "Guano! It's called guano! People in South America pay money for stuff like this!" I inserted my shovel and

lifted the top layer; underneath squirmed masses of fat white maggots. I looked up at my godfather and vomited all over myself.

In that house, we started breeding Siamese cats. They were all the rage then with the people who worked at Queen's University and the Royal Military College. At one point, we had twenty-one kittens of various sizes roaming around the house. I do not remember this as chaotic, but home movies from that time show kittens racing through every room, running up and down curtains and hanging from large plants. I kept track of dates of birth and sale. I named each kitten and tried to train some of my favourite ones to hide so they would not be sold. One night, a couple returned one of our kittens, bundled up tightly in paper towels. The woman said, "Did you know this kitten has fleas?" Her husband said, "Did you know Martin Luther King was just killed?"

During the day, I escaped to my bedroom, curled up cat-like on the wide pillowed sill and drew the curtain. I read Little Women over and over in there, pretending I was Jo March and unable to hear my mother calling me. At night, I turned off my bedroom light and stood beside the window. I looked out across the field, down the long slope of land past the old guard tower, towards the Women's Prison. If I stood up on the window-sill, I could see right into the courtyard, where a group of dark-clad women walked in circles under the watchful eyes of guards. Here and there floodlights

reflected on the steel of guns. I used to wonder what those women had done, and whether they would ever be freed. I made up stories to explain their lives. I wondered if they could see me when I waved.

That house was the one I walked toward the day I learned about rape. I walked past the group of jeering boys as if they weren't even there, my eyes on some point straight ahead in the distance. I walked down the long slow hill from the school, climbed up over the steel gate, walked along the winding road through the fields, past the old quarry where Paul and I used to build forts, and up the path between the barns to the house. I walked all that way with Bobby Dixon's spit on my leg, without ever once looking at it. I could feel it there, cold on my skin as it soaked through my mother's cast-off stockings, but I do not remember washing it off.

That was the house in which my brother Francis screamed for the last time. We were eating baloney sandwiches for lunch, and suddenly my father said, "We're moving to Toronto." Francis looked up, his eyes full of tears and terror, his fourteen-year-old face crumbling, shifting into some grotesque shape I'd never seen before. He opened his mouth wide and screamed, "No, Daddy, no!" There was a long silence. I looked at my father. He was inspecting his sandwich. I looked at my mother. She had a look in her eyes that I did not understand but later came to recognize as the

look in an animal's eyes when it knows it is cornered and may never escape. No one moved, no one spoke. Francis stopped screaming and hung his head. My father said, very quietly, "We'll have no more talk about this. We're leaving in three weeks."

Nothing was ever the same after we left that house. We moved into a modest brown brick buiding in a modest Toronto suburb, into a house just like everyone else's. My mother tried without success to grow roses. I learned about sex by watching two dogs. Francis started having seizures that threw his whole body into spasms and made his face turn blue. My father grew short-tempered and breathless, and finally collapsed on the floor one day, having had an attack in his heart. It's not that things would've been any better had we stayed in the old prison farmhouse, it's just that they were never the same once we left. The house closed its doors. No one else ever lived in it again. That house had given away all its stories.

Questions

In my childhood, there were no cousins, no aunts, no uncles, no grandparents-- not in the flesh, that is, for the ones who still survived lived far away in other countries. I used to wonder about their lives-- who they were, what they thought about, what they might be saying to each other on festive occasions when I knew relatives gathered, those occasions where in our house no one came to visit and I felt the smallness of our family, our isolation, our separation from the rest of the world. I prayed for all of my relations every night, whispering to myself in the darkness: "God bless my grannies, my aunties and uncles, and all my little cousins."

My kinfolk took their shape only in my mind, their forms growing firmer and clearer with every story my mother told about them. My mother's stories were glimpses, snatches, fragments that refused to cohere into any whole. From every telling of her stories, pyramids of questions grew inside me. Was Auntie Pat really still bitter after twenty years of widowhood? Why had Auntie Carmel suddenly abandoned her aging parents for London? Was John Sheridan really a devil who had tormented my Auntie Hylda to an early grave? And why had Uncle Michael been able to become a priest in Australia when no one in Ireland would ordain him?

My questions drove me round and round in circles. They drove a wedge into the cracks between my mother's stories, and the doubt that seeped in extended to her stories of herself, of my father. Why had they really left Ireland? Why could he never stay put? And why did she always give in to his continual uprooting of us all?

Sometimes I asked my mother questions, but her responses were never answers. She had a litany of established stories, a set pattern with little variation, and I learned that these were the only stories that could be told, that if there were other stories, stories beneath the stories, these would never be spoken, not by my mother, perhaps not by anyone else. Those other stories, the real ones I longed for, were fastened down somewhere with heavy boulders over them, too heavy for me to lift alone. I knew that if only I could hear these stories, their truth would ring in my bones and fill me to the brim.

My longing for answers carried me across the sea to Ireland. I wanted to know who I belonged to, whose blood ran through my veins, what web of beings I had been born from and into. But most of all, I wanted to hear the stories, the true stories, the ones that would explain everything to me once and for all.

My mother had told me that none of my relations would be interested in meeting me ("Ah, sure they wouldn't be bothered giving you the time of day"), so I told no one I was coming

and spent three days in a rain-soaked Dublin afraid to pick up the phone. I might hear silence after I spoke my name. They might never have heard of me, or if they had, they might have forgotten me by now. They might be busy, have other plans, be suddenly leaving town.

Of course this was not the case. I was greeted with great excitement and commotion, large offers of hospitality, astonishment that I hadn't called sooner, curiosity at why I'd come all that way alone. And there were stories, always stories, long days and nights of stories. It was what they were all best at, telling stories. Stories full of laughter and wit, stories of painless misfortune, stories of strange coincidences.

But as the days passed, the old familiar hunger grew within me. These stories, like my mother's, yielded no answers. There was no resounding ring of truth in my bones. And I could feel the pyramids mounting again, block by separate block, with each conflicting version of every story I heard. I was told my father had left Ireland because of his gambling-- no, because of unemployment-- no, because of his desire to escape his mother-- no, because of the death of his first son-- no, because he did not want his own children to have to emigrate. Perhaps all of these stories were true and perhaps none of them was true. Or perhaps some combination of them was true. But each teller insisted that his or her version, and that one only, was the truth.

In the end, the chain of stories I'd arrived with had only lengthened and my questions bayed at me like hounds. So I carried those questions down to the edge of the sea, to where the green fields ran down to the blue line of salty water. I set them down there in that in-between place which is neither sea nor shore but always both. I rolled heavy boulders on top of them and sat there for a while watching the waves and listening to the cries of unfamiliar birds. I sat there until the gnawing and the pyramids inside me dissolved. Some other sound began to ring in my bones.

Common Language

I thought it all started with Kathy Paquette on the school bus winding its way up and down the hilly curves of Highway 28. That was before the highway was straightened, flattened. There was money then for removing the irregularities of land.

Kathy was sitting behind me, my head half-turned listening to her, my eyes on the passing fields. Suddenly she leaned forward saying, "There's one kinky hair standing straight up on the top of your head." Before I could understand what she was saying, she reached up and plucked it out. I didn't feel much, just a momentary sting. Then Kathy held out the hair for me to see.

At home that night, in the bathroom with the door that locked only from the outside, I stood before the mirror beside the big claw-footed tub that my brother Francis nearly died in, riveted by the current in the water, his skin turned blue because the electrician forgot to ground the wiring. I examined my head for other kinky hairs, and finding none, went outside to put my horse in the barn.

Some time later, doing my Latin homework at the wooden desk in my small room with the climbing rose wallpaper, my hand explored my scalp, searching, and finding irregular hairs, pulled them out. Still reading, still writing, I let the hairs fall to the floor. When my homework was finished,

I looked down and thought absentmindedly that the long hairs coiled on the floor were like a nest of snakes. I gathered them up and hid them in the bottom of my wastepaper basket.

Years later, in the library at King's College, Moira and I whispered instead of studying. This was not long after I had left my baby in the Catholic hospital and walked home empty-armed, alone, to sit in my bedroom gazing at the window glass without noticing whether the sun had left the sky or risen. Moira said suddenly, "Do you realize you have two bald spots on either side of your head?" I only looked straight in mirrors, never at the side view. I hadn't known I was exposing myself. After that I was more careful, pulled the hairs out in even distribution, avoided the top of my head, let my hand creep through the underneath layers.

My hair got thinner and thinner, very gradually. I hoped if anyone noticed, they'd simply suspect that other things were taking a toll: age or smoking or the general wear and tear of hard living. I got my hair cut shorter and shorter, invested in perms to add compensatory volume. Once in a while I would be struck with horror and would soothe myself by saying, "I'll stop soon."

Now, every sentence I write, every line I read, costs a little more, a fee paid in a weightless measure of hair. I cannot read or write without my hand creeping through my hair, pulling, bringing the hair down to my mouth, sliding it between my teeth, then slowly eating it. Sometimes I

salivate. The hunger is insatiable. There is pleasure in the swallowing.

I still fear exposure. It is the one thing no one must know. I tell all the other stories, about the child, about the drugs, about the rape, about the blade marks and the burn marks, and about how nobody said anything. But I cannot touch the story of my hair.

Some nights I wake with fright from dreams of baldness, my scalp shiny and pink and my desire to hide in shame, my eyes cast down and my limbs curled around me. Some mornings I wake peaceful from dreams of soft fuzzy patches of new hair lining my head like a nest.

I speak a common language, secret, subsurface and deliberate, of scalps laid bare, of slashed flesh, of bruised and bitten skin. A language of the body in the act of no longer knowing itself, its unfeeling parts turned upon each other, like lovers become strangers become enemies. A language of pain become pleasure and pleasure become pain. An ancient language which no one teaches but which we learn well. Our tongues trip on it, our throats close around it; it slides along our bodies and whispers who we have become.

Medicine Lake

Alone beside a snow-covered lake, surrounded by the silence of mountains, I find death. Some large animal, its former shape now indistinct, its bloodied remains not yet frozen, lies hide-ripped and bone-scattered. The snow is a carpet of matter and excrement and I watch with quiet stillness.

This blood on the snow is a vise for my eyes. A perfection of colour: purity drenched, starkness saturated. The heavy crushing weight of red on white. The unbearable brightness of death.

I sink slowly into a centre of redness, falling through limitless layers, spellbound and unable to reach white. I am slow to understand that the colour of death is not black.

There is an empty stillness and then the even beat of deliberate raven wings. Severe blackness stroking a white wind. I watch hard beaks tear into the face of death. There is no time here for slow degeneration, only the instant transformation of life into life, of matter into flesh.

I cannot absorb this mystery. I try to reconstruct the moment of life's escape into death. I imagine struggle, a tearing pain, a final breath, the gesture of surrender. But every scene I summon fails to fathom this blood on the snow, this sacrifice of praise.

Then you in a dark night, fallen fast and rising slow, hand to your head and blood spilling on snow. Your face fractured like stained glass by leaden rivers of blood racing their downward path. Your eyes a mirror for my thousand questions, confusion holding me fast.

We search for the wound with sightless hands. We grope in the darkness slowly, gently, following the warm rush of blood to its source, touching just the edges, just the early swelling, without fingering the wound's inner rawness.

I bandage you like some motley gypsy, too blond for all this blood. My coat thinly spotted, I rub your warmth into my skin, your blood a salve for my hands. I tremble, but I do not fall. I stagger, but I do not flee.

We move like shadows from some dream world, through a script imagined long ago. We play out parts we have not chosen. We speak our lines, unsure of the words. And these scenes have nothing to do with you or me, or even us together. Only blood on the snow, blood let and left.

I sink into the heavy waves of a red tide and rise slowly to their surface, saturated. I swallow my fear in gulps and lower the hand fisted against life. I stretch the fingers cramped from beating back love. My bones lose their brittleness.

Social Problems

Head Nurse comes storming, thundering, raging in. Gale force 10. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

She doesn't actually say "hell"; this is a Catholic hospital. Hell is real but not spoken, in the mind and body but not on the tongue.

"I'm going to school." Plain and simple. Spoken like a fact, heard like a challenge. The Girl stands still, waiting. Head Nurse edges closer, fixes herself heavily between The Girl and the door. Three other women watch from their beds, sitting upright and still, waiting. Their eyes travel a line between Head Nurse and The Girl. No one will take sides.

"No, you're not. You're not going anywhere. You can take that coat off and get right back into bed."

The coat stays zipped. The boots don't move. The scarf remains wrapped around the throat.

"My doctor said I could go to school as long as I'm back by four for my shot."

"Well you're not going today. We're in the middle of a big snowstorm. You could fall and hurt yourself. Think of the baby."

Everything is "think of the baby". The Girl just wants to go to school. She has to go to school. School is the lifeboat that floats between her and drowning.

"I'll be very careful. I'll walk very slowly. I'll take the bus."

Head Nurse hisses. "You'll do no such thing. I absolutely forbid you to leave this building. And until your doctor leaves written word on my desk, you'll go nowhere. It's bad enough that you sit up half the night reading those books, but to think you can trot off anywhere you feel like... you should be ashamed of yourself going near that place at all with the size of you and no ring on your finger."

Head Nurse tornadoes out. The Girl looks from one woman to another, waiting for a sign. Nothing. Three sets of eyes lowered, averted. Suddenly everyone's busy. She can feel their satisfaction. They think she's odd, studying while she's pregnant. More interested in books than the baby.

The Girl walks to the window. Snow is coming down thick and fast. A bus pulls up and leaves. (You should be ashamed of yourself.) Inside the baby kicks. Reminds her. She wants it out and over with. Gone. Two more months. She can't decide whether to see it when it's born. "It'll be too hard," they tell her.

Another bus crawls up the hill. The Girl walks out into the hall. No sign of Head Nurse. The boots make it to the elevator. The Girl stares at the numbers above the door, willing the moving red light to speed up. The door

slides open. The Girl steps into Head Nurse's angry eyes. (You should be ashamed of yourself.) The Girl sees Head Nurse's mouth open.

Too embarrassing. The boots turn around and retrace their steps to the room. Three pairs of silent eyes watch the coat unzip, the scarf unwind from the throat. The boots sit in the bottom of the locker, still dry.

The Girl pulls out her books. She opens Social Problems in Canada. She wants to be a social worker. She wants this badly. The school turned her down last year. She will study hard and improve her marks. Apply again. In two months. The baby kicks. Be quiet. (You should be ashamed of yourself.)

The day crawls by. Snowflakes keep falling. 4:00 p.m. A nurse comes in, full of that fake cheerfulness. "How's everyone feeling today?" Frowns at The Girl's books piled on her bed. Hands her the needle and two small bottles of insulin. Stands by to watch. To make sure The Girl does it right.

The needle punctures the rubber cap of one bottle. The Girl pushes it further up into the liquid. Draws up 10 cc. Pierces the other bottle. 15 cc. Raise the needle. Push the insulin up to the top. Flick the plastic cylinder. Make sure there's no air in there.

The Girl looks at the nurse. The nurse looks at the syringe.

Lift the nightgown. Pinch the thigh. Slide the needle in. Push the insulin out. The Girl feels like she is doing this to someone else. Something in the back of her mind stirs. Like remembering something that hasn't happened yet. Pull the needle out. Give it to the nurse.

The Girl lies down. This is why she's here. To learn how to do this. To find the right dosage. To get the right diet figured out. It will help the baby. It is an experiment.

The Girl is proud to be part of an experiment. She feels like a heroine. On a frontier. Going forth where few have gone before. Blazing a trail for those who will follow. They won't gain excessive weight. Their babies will be the proper size. Their babies won't have trouble breathing.

The Girl turns back to her book. There is a chapter on unwed mothers. Statistics on how many girls have babies out of wedlock every year. Descriptions of the ones who keep their babies: poor, isolated, distraught. The Girl is different. She has left home. She has three room-mates, all friends. She goes to university. She will give up the baby. She will become a social worker. This pregnancy is only a temporary snag in things. Once the baby is born, it will be all over and she can put it behind her. She will carry on as if it never happened.

Flesh and Blood

There is a story I want to tell. I've told bits and pieces of it before, condensed versions offered cautiously to close friends, tentative fragments that have slipped out unexpectedly into the circle of lovers' arms. At times, I've ransacked this story for its humorous potential, drawing out scenes that could be exchanged for laughs. At times, I've presented this story as evidence of my heroism. But I've never told anyone the whole story, with all of its high moments and small details woven together, with all of its painful emotion still intact. I've never told the whole story before because it seemed too long and I wondered who could bear to sit and listen from beginning to end. I wondered who would want to hear a story about silence, isolation and shame. But lately the memories are pushing hard against me, the unspoken words are crowding out everything else. The story burns inside me and demands a voice. It demands a simple voice, ordinary words. It has no desire to sound clever. The story resists explanation and reflection. It demands a voice that answers the question "what happened?" with the simple story of "this is how it was for me".

Before I finished my first year of university at Western, I missed my period. I'd never missed one before, but I'd heard it could happen as a result of stress, so I

thought that was probably it, because after all I was on the pill. When my period should've come in early April, I was full of anxiety about final exams and full of dread about leaving Tom and all my friends and returning home for the summer. I'd never really had any friends before, but here a lot of people seemed to like me. I wasn't sure why. I used to sit in the bathroom counting on my fingers the people who I knew liked me. I couldn't get over it.

When everyone had gone back to their home towns for the summer, I used to walk around the residence halls wondering if it had all really happened. The whole building seemed dead. I was staying on alone because I still had two papers left to finish. I holed up in the sewing room that looked out over the trees behind the college and wrote my essays in there. They weren't great, my heart wasn't really in them. I wanted to finish them so I could get away from the emptiness at the college, but I wasn't in any hurry to get home.

In fact, I was dreading going back to Port Hope. My younger brother Paul, who was my only ally in those days, was gone, somewhere out West, running from the law. He'd been gone for four months; I didn't hear from him very often, but I used to dream of him a lot. Always frightening dreams, things like him getting shot or being chased or dying. I didn't know how I'd manage living at home without him. I wouldn't have anyone on my side.

I was dreading the rules too. I'd gotten used to doing whatever I wanted to, staying out all night if I felt like it, and now I was going to have to go back to an 11 o'clock curfew and leaving the phone number of where I'd be and proving that someone's parents would be there. I wouldn't be able to go to a movie unless it was one my parents had already seen. I'd have to say the Rosary every night and go to confession every Saturday and Mass on Sundays.

But mostly I was dreading the loneliness. I didn't have any real friends in Port Hope and there was no one I could talk to at home, just a lot of silence and disapproving looks. If I was ever feeling bad about something I'd be told there were a lot of other people wghi were far worse off. Then I'd feel guilty and ungrateful. That was when I used to go off and talk to my animals, or maybe have a cry with them. But now all my animals were gone. I'd had to sell April before I left for Western, so I wasn't going to be able to ride anymore. My parents had moved into town while I'd been away at school and they'd given my dog Bunter to the people who took over the farmhouse. The old stray dog I'd lured into living in our barn had taken off somewhere, and all my cats had been given away to good homes.

It wasn't just the animals I was going to miss. It was the comfort I always found in open spaces. Walking through the fields by myself, lying down beside the creek. Roaming through the old maple sugar woods where the owl was.

Gathering up armfuls of wild summer flowers. Standing outside in the yellow air of a thunderstorm, lifting up my arms and opening my mouth and letting the rain soak me to my skin.

That was all gone now, and I didn't feel like I had very much to look forward to. Not in Port Hope anyway. At least I had a summer job. I was going to be a flag-girl on road construction, where Highway 28 was being straightened out. The pay would be good because we'd be working long hours. The job would keep me out of the house for twelve hours every day.

So when I missed that period, I thought of all these things and figured it was just the stress. I assumed I'd start bleeding again when I got home. But I didn't. In early May, I missed another period, and then I began to worry. I kept trying to figure out how I was going to get to a doctor, but I worked until seven o'clock every evening and the only clinic in town was closed by 4:30. Besides, I'd have to explain why I was going there in the first place. Pretty soon, the only thing I could think about was "what if I'm pregnant?" One day at work, I forgot to turn my sign around from "slow" to "stop" and a carload of people went sailing past me and just missed the dump-truck that was backing out onto the highway. My knees were shaking at the thought of what might've happened. The foreman came over and

yelled and screamed at me, saying if that happened again I'd be looking for another job.

I went home crying and couldn't eat my supper so I went up to my room. A few minutes later, my mother came up and asked me what was wrong. I told her what had happened at work, and she said, "Is there anything else?" I said "No," but I couldn't look at her. I kept staring at the floor until she said, "Are you sure?" I said "Yes" and then she said "Mary, I haven't been a nurse for thirty years and a mother four times for nothing."

Then I looked at her, trying to see what she meant, if we could possibly be thinking the same thing, and I saw in her eyes what she suspected. I think those were the hardest words I ever said to anyone, when I stared numbly at little flowers on my bedspread and said to her, "I'm afraid I might be pregnant."

She was obviously ready for this. She told me to be ready after work next day and we'd go over to the clinic in Cobourg to see Doctor Rose. She must have been terribly upset, but she didn't show it, she was simply very matter-of-fact. She said "I won't tell your father, we'll just go and see what happens." I don't know how she explained our trip the next evening, but my father always had his head buried in <u>The Globe and Mail</u> after supper, so maybe he didn't notice us leaving.

Doctor Rose asked me when my last period was, and then poked around my abdomen a bit. He didn't do any tests, but he told me that my uterus was enlarged and that I was two months pregnant. I heard those words but they didn't seem possible. My mother and I drove back to the Fifth Line in silence. When I got out of the car, she said, "I'll leave it to you to tell your father."

Every day that week, I tried to rehearse what I was going to say to him, but nothing seemed adequate. I believed I had just ruined my parents' lives. I had done the worst thing I could possibly have done, the thing that would bring the most shame upon my parents. They were devout Catholics, examples to their community. My father was the Grand Knight of the Catholic Knights of Columbus. My mother was the President of the Catholic Women's League. Now their daughter was pregnant. My parents would be the target of gossip. They would not be able to hold their heads up in our small town.

One evening my father came up to my room and sat on my bed and said, "I hear you have a problem." I had expected a huge angry outburst. I'd been expecting him to throw me out of the house. Normally he went into rages over even small things; if I chewed gum he'd shout at me, calling me a bucolic cow and a common trollop. But now he just looked defeated and said I'd better hurry up and make up my mind what I was going to do. He reminded me that abortion was

murder. He said, "I don't know how you feel about Tom, but if you live together I cannot offer you any financial support; that would be condoning something wrong." He never recommended marriage. I assumed he didn't like Tom.

I moved numbly through those days-- getting up, going to work, coming home, going to bed. I couldn't look anyone in the eye. I felt heavy, like I was carrying around a huge black weight that everyone could see. I stopped taking the pill. I couldn't decide what to do. Even the thought of abortion made me feel queasy. I'd been with my parents when they went to local high schools speaking on the Right to Life. I'd seen the coloured slides of fetuses at various stages of development in the womb, all curled up with their big heads and transparent hands. I'd seen photographs of aborted fetuses, bloodied bits of flesh discarded in a heap. I couldn't imagine having something alive torn out of your body like that. I'd have to have the baby.

I thought about marrying Tom, but I wasn't sure I loved him and I couldn't imagine him as a husband and a father. I couldn't imagine myself as a wife or a mother. I thought about my mother, the endless housework, the way she kept her lips so tightly pressed together. I thought about how she'd stare out the window sometimes, with her hands wrapped around her mug of coffee. I thought about my feeling that children had ruined her life, chained her to her house and kept her from doing things she wanted to do.

Tom was no help at all. He came to see me once, but when I tried to talk about my pregnancy, he made silly jokes and changed the subject. He talked about how great his summer job was and how he went out drinking every Friday after work with the rest of the guys. He complained about my lack of interest in sex. On my birthday, we made love on a small strip of sand on the edge of Lake Ontario. The air was cool. I worried about someone seeing us. The sound of waves lapping the shore distracted me.

Thoughts were slow to take shape in my mind. I don't remember any particular moment of having made a decision. It was more like options kept falling by the wayside-- I'd get an idea and then it would harden into impossibility and drop from my mind. Sometimes I prayed, "Please help me know what to do," but no voice ever answered. Tom finally told me he didn't want a baby; he wanted an abortion. No disruption of his life, no judgmental gossip, certainly no marriage. When I refused to agree, he became terribly angry. That anger never ended.

I tried to think of myself with a baby. It was hard to imagine. I didn't know anything about babies; I'd never even held one. All I could see was myself and this baby living on welfare in some dark and dingy basement suite, me alone and the baby crying, me not knowing what to do and being at the end of my rope and then hitting the baby. Somehow there were

no family or friends in that picture, just me and this baby alone all the time.

That picture kept going around and around in my head. I wanted so badly to be able to talk to someone, but the house was full of a strained silence. Paul came back, tired of being on the run and always looking over his shoulder. He was hiding out at a friend's house. I went over to see him and told him I was pregnant. All he said was "oh, yeah? I bet that's going over well." I listened to him talk about the Coast, how he'd slept in ditches till he found a job, how he'd lived with a woman who was fifteen years older than him. There was a new edge to him, a hardness. I didn't know him anymore.

When I told my friends from London that I was pregnant, they all wrote back and said they couldn't believe it and how could this have happened and what was I going to do. We weren't all that young, most of my friends were nineteen, but none of us could imagine having a baby, never mind raising a child. It wasn't just because we weren't married, it was because we were supposed to be going to university and getting careers so we could be independent. My friends talked to me about my future, how if I kept the baby I wouldn't be able to keep going to university and I'd never have a decent job. One of my friends said no one would ever want to go out with me if I had a child. I'd thought about that a lot; Port Hope was full of young girls who'd kept

their babies and I'd seen the way they were treated. They were assumed to be sluts.

Somewhere along the way, I decided what I was going to do. I couldn't bear the thought of staying in Port Hope or living at home once I started to show, so I decided I'd go back to London at the end of the summer and keep going to university and have the baby and give it up for adoption. Tom was furious with me. He said that giving up your own child was the worst thing a person could do. He said, "If you go back to London pregnant, then everyone will know. They'll blame me. I'll lose all my friends." And that was that. He had no feeling for me. So I lost my feeling for him. I told him I never wanted to see him again.

The summer dragged on and on. I stood on the side of the road for twelve hours a day turning my sign from "slow" to "stop" and back again. I wore a red hard-hat and an orange vinyl vest and between the two of them I sometimes thought I'd die in the heat. Southern Ontario in the summer is hot and humid; the air just hangs there till you feel like you'd sell your soul for a breeze. Even standing there not moving, I'd feel like I was going to suffocate. Sweat ran down my face and back. My feet were on fire. My ankles swelled. I grew to hate the sun.

When I got up in the morning, I felt sick. This was the one thing I told my mother, or maybe she heard me throwing up in the bathroom. At any rate, she bought me some Arrowroot

cookies and told me to eat a few very slowly before I got out of bed. Generally that helped, but sometimes at work that awful queasiness would start up again and I wouldn't be able to eat my lunch and then I'd feel even more faint in the heat. I never missed a day of work, though. I understood that if I stayed home, my parents would think I was feeling sorry for myself or being lazy.

One morning I was throwing up so much I missed my ride to work. I was sitting in the kitchen trying to recover when my father came downstairs and blew up at me. After he left the house, I just sat there for a couple of hours till I felt like I could walk and then I hitch-hiked out the highway to work. It was better to be out there anyway. At home it was all stony silence and being ignored because I'd done such a terrible thing. Out there on the highway, things seemed normal. People were carrying on with the work of building a road. They talked to each other and cracked jokes to make the time pass.

On our crew, there was an older fellow named Glenn. I noticed him because one of his arms was deformed and he held it close to his side while he drove his packer with the other hand. Glenn used to come by and chat with me when things weren't busy. He wasn't like the other men, the ones that stared at me but never greeted me, or the ones that made jokes about my breasts getting bigger and how they wished that would happen to their wives. Glenn was different; he

told me about his life and how he never had a girlfriend because of his arm, and he asked me about my life and what sort of plans I had for myself.

Glenn was watching out for me, though I didn't realize it. One sweltering afternoon, when I was hanging on to my stop sign and trying to stay upright, not faint or vomit, he came up to me and took the sign from my hand saying, "Now why don't you just go and sit down over there under that tree." Tears pooled in my eyes. I felt as if no one had ever shown me such enormous kindness. After that, Glenn often brought me water and let me sit down for a while. One day he said to me, "You're pregnant, aren't you?" I was stunned. I thought I was hiding it well. He asked me what I was going to do. When I told him, he shook his head kindly. He said he hoped I'd be okay.

In early August, when the highway project was completed, I took another job flagging in downtown Port Hope. The gas company was ripping up the main street ahead of us, digging huge trenches and replacing gas lines. We followed behind, putting in new sidewalks and curbs, resurfacing the street. As August progressed, my legs began to give me trouble. Standing still in the sweltering heat made my calves and ankles swell painfully. Finally I told my mother I wanted to quit my job. There was only one more week left until school began. My mother told me to speak to my father. He said no, that under no circumstances whatsoever was I to quit, that I

would work until the day I left for London. But that Friday, I decided I couldn't face one more dizzy, nauseous day of swollen ankles. I told my foreman I was leaving.

No one at home spoke to me for three days. It was as if I did not exist. Most of the time, I stayed in my room reading. On Monday, I sat in the dining room eating lunch with my parents. Suddenly we heard a huge blast that rattled the windows of the house. I knew in that instant what the noise was. I looked at my father, then at my mother. Nobody said anything. I got up and left the house.

Downtown, a entire block of the main street had disappeared, replace by a huge crater. The brick buildings that had lined both sides of the street were piles of rubble. I walked very slowly down the hill. Ambulances were racing away from the scene. Papers from the files of blown-up offices floated through the air. A group of firemen were trying to rescue an old woman from what was left of her second-storey apartment. The woman had been in her bathtub when the explosion occurred; her apartment had suddenly vanished and she was exposed to the street, her tub miraculously still clinging to the back wall of the building. The woman stared out at the onlookers and refused to budge.

I found the men I'd worked with standing silently in small groups. They told me no one understood what had happened. There'd been a sudden explosion and five men were dead. One of them was the fourteen-year old son of my

foreman. He had replaced me when I'd quit my job three days before. The men told me I was lucky.

I spent most of the day sitting by myself on the shaded steps of Plummer's Drugstore, watching the chaos on the street. I thought of my foreman, how he used to smile at me and ask me why I looked so sad. He'd tell me life was too short to spend it being blue, then he'd walk away whistling. I thought of his young son, how he hated wearing his hard hat and threw it down on the ground whenever his father wasn't around.

When I got back home, my mother was making supper. She didn't ask me where I'd been. I told her what had happened. She kept peeling the carrots. I told her it was a good thing that I'd quit my job when I did, that if I'd worked one more day I would've ended up dead. My mother didn't say anything. My father came in the door from work. I told him what had happened. He didn't say anything either. He turned to my mother and asked her if she'd like a glass of sherry.

Their silence didn't surprise me. That's how it always was in our house. Things happened and nobody said anything. I was never sure what the silence meant, so I filled it with my own meaning. In this instance, I knew the words I wanted to hear. "I'm so glad you're alive." I understood the silence to mean they weren't glad at all.

A week later, I returned to London. As soon as I got there, I breathed more easily. At home, I'd felt smothered

by the weight of shame I carried, and the tension inside the house was unbearable. Paul had been arrested and gone to jail. My father had begun to drink a lot, staying out long nights at the golf course. My mother was fretful with anxiety. I was glad to escape that house before my belly began to grow.

I'd been planning since spring to share an apartment in London with my girlfriend Lori. When I wrote to tell her I was pregnant, Lori had responded right away, saying "no problem." She'd said she'd go down to London some weekend in August to look for a place. When she got home, she called me up and said she'd decided her friend Judy could live with us too. She said they'd looked for a three-bedroom apartment but couldn't find one, so they'd leased a two-bedroom place instead. She told me I could sleep on the couch. I wasn't all that surprised. It was hard to tell someone you didn't want them around.

Instead, I moved in with three other girlfriends: Nancy, Lisa and Lisa's sister Anne. We shared the top two floors of an old wooden house. The space was small and we were short on furniture but the rooms filled up with laughter. They kept me going, those three young women.
They made sure I ate my vegetables and when winter came and the sidewalks grew icy, one of them always walked me to the bus stop. They were my allies, they formed a circle of protection around me and swore they'd never speak to Tom.

In London, I threw myself into my studies, determined that this pregnancy would not affect my schooling. I wanted a career. I wanted desperately to get into the social work program, and I'd been turned down the first time I applied. I spent my evenings in the library studying and my grades improved by twenty percent. Studying kept me from brooding too much. I clung to my schoolwork like a life raft. There had to be some reason for living other than this baby I was going to give away to strangers. I counted the days until I would be free.

In October, I went to The Children's Aid Society to make arrangements for the adoption. My social worker's name was Mrs. Rankin; she had a whisky voice and shaking hands. I sat in front of her wearing my faded blue jeans and one of my three homemade maternity tops, looking at her expensive wool dresses and silk scarves and gold jewelry. Her hands covered with rings. She asked me a lot of questions but never "are you sure you want to give up this child?" Everyone-- my parents, my friends, my doctors-- assumed it was the only thing to do. I was told that I was too young to be a good mother. I was told that a child needed a father, that a mother alone was not enough. I was told that raising a child properly required money, and that only the presence of a father could ensure that. The message was that to keep this child would be to deliberately and harmfully deprive it of a

father, of all the advantages of a secure and stable home. I took this message very seriously.

In November, I started going to weekly prenatal classes. I sat by myself in a circle of four couples. The couples were all having their first babies; they held each other's hands and smiled a lot. The nurse who ran the group asked me where my husband was. I said I didn't have one. She said, "Oh," smiled at me with pity, and looked around the group with embarrassment. I felt as though I had just committed a sin. No one there ever looked at me or spoke to me after that. They all talked about how happy they were, what a wonderful experience having their first child was. Sometimes one of the men would place his hand protectively over his wife's belly. After three weeks, I stopped going to the classes.

Every week I visited Doctor Baxter. He always strode vigorously into the examining room and looked right into my eyes. He had the kindest face I'd ever seen, merry eyes with warmth and laughter engraved in the lines around them. I always left his office feeling like everything would be fine. But one day Dr. Baxter's eyes darkened and he said, "Mary, you're supposed to be seven months pregnant but you're hardly showing at all. You look to me like you're only about five months. I'm starting to think that your first doctor was wrong about your due date." I looked at Doctor Baxter with dismay. I'd been counting the days. Two more months? Not

early December, but early February? I saw myself facing my family at Christmas, their eyes averted from my big, awkward belly. I saw myself going through two months of winter with no coat big enough to cover a pregnancy.

Doctor Baxter waited patiently. "You know what this means, don't you? It means that when your first doctor told you you were two months pregnant, you weren't pregnant at all. You must've gotten pregnant after that." The merriness had left his eyes, replaced by something like pity and weariness. I thought of the two missed periods. I remembered going off the pill. I thought of the afternoon with Tom on the strip of sand beside Lake Ontario.

At home I lay on my bed and looked at the ceiling. I put my hand on my belly. There was only a slight swelling. No movement. I thought of Doctor Rose. His sureness. His hand probing my abdomen. How could he have said that? Shouldn't there have been some kind of test? I thought of him in his office, his nice life in order. I thought about going back to Cobourg and storming in there unannounced, ripping the stethoscope from around his neck, throwing his books at him. Of course I wouldn't do any such thing; he was my parents' doctor. I tried to get up off my bed but couldn't. Something terribly heavy had me pinned down. I felt cursed.

Winter came. My friend Moira gave me a coat to wear, a long navy blue ski jacket that she didn't need. Moira was

very large, so the jacket encircled me with room to spare. It kept me warm and hidden. Moira often came over to keep me company while my roommates were out at parties. We would sit at the kitchen table drinking tea. I don't remember what we talked about, but we always ended up laughing. Moira was the wittiest girl I'd ever known.

When I arrived home for Christmas, my father was alone at the train station. He said, "Your mother's had an accident. She's at home in bed." My mother had done the impossible; she had run over herself with her own car. She had pulled up at the curb outside a shopping mall, put the car into "park" and stepped out to post some letters. The car began to roll backwards. When she tried to get back in to stop it, the heavy front door knocked her to the ground. The car continued rolling backwards, the front wheel moving across her feet, up her legs, across her hips, and up over her ribs. It was headed straight for her head when it slowly began to turn, climbing up her collarbone, over her neck and back down onto the pavement. When it was over, my mother had broken both ankles, her left leg in three places, her pelvis in two places. Every rib was cracked, her collarbone fractured. Her skin was bruised and grazed.

My mother was lying on a bed in the den, unable to move. She had refused to stay in the hospital; she said people only got sicker in those places. My father had stayed home for two weeks to look after her. Now that I was there, he could

go back to work. I fed and bathed my mother, changed her bedpan and brushed her hair, all the while listening to her incoherent rambling. One day she suddenly said, "Mary, I can hear angels in one ear and string instruments in the other." I called my father at work. I said, "I think she's dying." He sent for the ambulance. It turned out she was having an allergic reaction to one of the painkillers.

Paul was out of jail by then; both he and Francis came home for Christmas too. No one asked me how I was. No one said anything about the fact that I was almost eight months pregnant. That is the way it was in our family. We would all pretend that certain things were not really happening. And whenever there was a crisis that we couldn't deal with, someone would create a new crisis to divert attention. When I was about to come home hugely and undeniably pregnant, my mother ran over herself with the car.

On Christmas Day, my father, Francis, Paul and I headed off to Mass. My father drove past our church and on down the hill. No one said anything. When we turned onto the highway, I asked, "Where are we going?" My father replied, "I thought we'd go over to the church in Cobourg today." We'd never been to that church before. I could feel my face burning with shame. I was not to walk down the aisle in a church where our family was known. I was to be hidden away. I was to be made invisible. I often wished that things would just be said outright. I could've handled the directness of

words, however enraged or cruel they might be. What I could not cope with was the silence all around me, the negation and denial of my self, my body, this baby inside me. I knew I had done wrong, but I wondered how long I should be punished for it.

Back in London, I waited. And waited. When the baby moved inside me, kicking sharply, I jumped. The movements frightened me. I thought they meant the baby was angry at me. I hated the thought of having a baby inside me, living off me. My body wasn't my own anymore. I felt tired all the time. My back hurt. I lost my balance easily while standing up on moving buses. The skin on my abdomen was chronically itchy and stretched taut; it had started to tear. From the top of my breasts down to the top of my thighs, my white skin was covered with red streaks that looked like blood-filled cracks. No one had told me I ought to put cream on my skin; it never occurred to me that this would help.

When the contractions finally came, I thought "thank god, it's almost over." I lay on my bed, surrounded by Moira and my three roommates. Lisa sat at my desk, stop-watch in hand, making a large chart for graphing the progress of my contractions. Anne kept the music going on my record-player. Nancy ran in and out serving coffee and tea. Moira cracked jokes. None of us had a clue what was going on or what lay ahead. I felt safe there, though, surrounded and cozy.

Nothing bad could happen to me as long as these four friends stayed with me.

I refused to go to the hospital until I really had to. I'd never been in one before. Outside the snow was falling thick and fast; by the time I was ready to go, the city was deep in a severe storm. I called my parents as they had asked me to. My father would drive my mother down to London so she could be with me. I didn't want her to come, I didn't want her to see me like this, but I couldn't say so. Nancy called her boyfriend to come and get us and we skidded and ploughed our way up to St. Joseph's Hospital. We were giddy with nervousness.

In "Admitting," the nurse told me to sit down, but I declined; there was water running down my leg and I was afraid I'd leave a wet spot on the chair. Again she told me to sit down and again I refused. She glared at me and turned to her typewriter. She asked Nancy's boyfriend his name and started typing it on the form. I said, "He's not my husband." The nurse said, "Well then, where is your husband?" "I don't have one." "Well then, who's the father?" I said, "I don't know." She looked at my wedding ring finger and shook her head.

The labour room was a small white room with a tiny window that looked onto the wall of another part of the hospital. Nancy's boyfriend discreetly stayed in the waiting room, but Moira, Lisa, Anne and Nancy crowded into the labour

room with me. Lisa wondered if there was a Coke machine around. We were all getting settled when a nurse charged angrily in and asked us what we thought we were doing. Only the husband could be in the labour room. I said, "I don't have a husband." Again that look. "I want my friends here." "Well, you can't, it's against the rules." "I want to speak to the head nurse." "Okay, you can have one of your friends in with you, but only one. You'll have to pick one." I chose Nancy, apologizing to the others. All I could think of was the way Nancy always took my arm on icy patches.

Lisa and Moira and Anne retreated to the waiting room, then took turns sneaking past the nursing station to my labour room. We whispered and giggled. We were winning the war. It was important not to be defeated. Lisa smuggled in pop and chips. I kept telling everyone to go home and get some sleep, but I was happy when they refused to leave me. I'd never felt so cared for in all my life.

Early in the morning, my parents dutifully arrived. My father came into the room and shook my hand. He said, "All the best" and left immediately to drive another four hours back to Port Hope to get to work. My mother was dressed in her old nurse's uniform, complete with her cap and badge. I was embarrassed by this display of false authority. My mother was still recovering from her accident; she walked slowly with a wooden cane. She said, "You took such good

care of me at Christmas, now it's my turn to pay you back." I felt sick with guilt and shame.

My girlfriends had to leave. My contractions slowed down, grew farther apart. By the next afternoon, I was still much the same. Doctor Baxter came in and said, "I think we're going to have to speed this labour up." He held my hand and looked into my eyes and said, "You'll be just fine." I asked him if he would come back when I was ready to deliver, even if it was the middle of the night. He said, "Don't you worry, I'll be here like a shot." A nurse came in and hooked me up to an I.V. I lay there watching the fluid drip slowly down the long plastic tube.

Suddenly the contractions came fast and hard, and I couldn't seem to adjust to the change. I felt as if someone else had taken over my body. The pain frightened me. I asked for an epidural. After that, my whole lower body seemed disconnected. I could not even move my own legs. I was a body attached by wires to gadgets and machines: a catheter, the epidural, the IV, a fetal monitor. Over and over again, the baby tried to push its way through me. I was terribly frightened. I longed for a cigarette. I lost track of time.

Silent and anxious, my mother kept vigil with me. Her eyes on the fetal monitor, where a red light showed the baby's heart-rate soaring with each contraction. I felt as if something was terribly wrong. I called for the intern.

He didn't come. I called again. When he came, I told him something was going wrong. He said, "How would you know, you've never had a baby before." Outside my room, I heard a nurse ask the intern when he was going home. He said through his yawn, "Whenever that McNamee girl hurries up and has her baby."

An uncontrollable fear was building in me, thick and solid. I began to panic. I said to my mother, "There's something wrong." She said, "I think you're right." She called for the intern. He didn't come. I called for the nurse. She left to find the intern. More panic. There was only one thing that mattered, that this baby be born safely. I started screaming. The intern rushed in and examined me. He said, "You're right. There's something wrong. We're going to have to do a Caesarean section." I felt smug.

My mother turned to me and said, "I'm so relieved. I was so afraid that what happened to me would happen to you. I was in labour for three days and I begged them for a Caesarean, your father even went to the head of the hospital and demanded one, but they refused and they had to drag the baby out of me. He was so damaged they wouldn't let me see him. He died after three days. I was so afraid this would happen to your baby, and that all this would have been for nothing."

The labour room became a whirlwind of activity. When all the wires were disconnected, the sudden rush of pain was

unbearable. The epidural had muffled the strength of the contractions and I wasn't prepared for how they'd been building up. I was moved onto a stretcher. My mother kissed me good-bye. She said, "I'll see you in the recovery room." I was whisked away and rolled quickly through a labyrinth of quiet hallways. I saw a clock go by. It was 1:00 a.m.

In the operating room, two nurses counted sponges. I said, "Where is everyone?" After a few moments, one of the nurses glanced at the clock and without looking at me said, "Oh, they'll be along soon." They resumed counting out loud. I glared at them and wished ill upon them. My mind was filled with two words repeating themselves over and over, "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up." A surgeon arrived and introduced himself. An anaesthetist followed. More nurses. Doctor Baxter rushed in. He took my hand and said, "I told you I'd be here." I never took my eyes off him. I said, "Please hurry up and put me to sleep."

When I opened my eyes the room would not come into focus. I wondered where I was and why I was there. A nurse came over and stood beside my bed. I asked her where my mother was. The nurse looked surprised and said, "Well, she was here when you first woke up, but you told her to go home. Don't you remember? You opened your eyes and looked at her and asked her what she was doing there. You told her you didn't want her there, that she should go home. So she left." I felt terrible. My mother had come all that way to

be with me and I'd told her to get lost. How could I do such a thing? The nurse looked at me expectantly. "Aren't you going to ask about your baby?" "Oh, yes," I said. She smiled. "You have a baby boy. He's fine." I looked up at her and said, "I had a baby boy."

I woke up again in a private room. There was no one there. I got up to go to the bathroom, and fell to my knees on the cold terazzo floor. I had never had surgery before. I didn't understand what it does to you. I couldn't get up. I waited until a nurse came in. "What on earth are you doing?" she cried, gathering me up. "You've just had abdominal surgery." That was it: I'd had surgery. I didn't feel like I'd had a baby at all. Something had started and then been disrupted, never completed. There was a big gap, a blank. The reason I'd kept going for the last eleven months was gone. Vanished. I'd never even felt him leaving me.

My mother sat beside my bed, knitting. I don't remember ever talking with her. Surely we must've said something. All I remember is her bringing me a tiny teddy bear. I looked at it and couldn't feel anything. I stared at the ceiling a lot. Periodically I tried to walk. I felt strangely light, as if I might just blow away, even in that airless room. During the evenings, my mother went back to her room at the YWCA and Lisa, Anne and Moira came to see me. They told me stories about what was happening at school, and who'd been asking for me. We never talked about the baby.

One day a photographer came into my room. He said, "I've got a great picture of your baby here; how'd you like to buy some copies?" I didn't look at the picture in his hand. I said, "No, thanks." I'd been told this would happen. My mother had told me to say no, that it would not be a healthy thing to have a picture of this baby. It would remind me of him too much. It would make me brood. I was supposed to forget him. I wanted the picture, badly. Something I could hold on to, so I'd know all this had really happened. But I said no.

On the third day, Mrs. Rankin came into my room with papers for me to sign. She never asked me how I was. I signed my name. That meant that in thirty days the baby would be given to the couple who would raise him. I asked Mrs. Rankin who these people were. She told me they were in their thirties, that they had been married for years and had been unable to have a baby of their own. They had been waiting to adopt a baby for a long time. She said they were very happy now. I asked her if I could write a letter to the baby, to give to his new parents. She said no, that wasn't allowed. After a long silence, she said, "Well, you could write one and I'll put it in the adoption file. If he ever comes to the agency to ask about you, we could give him the letter. But it's not likely that he'd ever do that." She left saying, "I hope you do well in school."

Every day I lay in bed thinking "just down the hall in the nursery is the baby I had." I couldn't say the words "my baby." I couldn't afford to think of him as mine; he belonged to someone else. I knew that at any moment I could walk down the hall and look at him. But I didn't. Everyone had told me it was better not to see him. It would be too hard. It was better to forget about him. I tried not to think about him lying there alone. I tried not to think about him crying and having no one to pick him up.

I decided I wanted the baby baptized. Not that I was such a good Catholic; I'd stopped going to Mass when I left home. But I remembered the stories of children going to purgatory. Purgatory was a milder version of hell. After you did time there, you could go to heaven. Purgatory was where all unbaptized babies went when they died. I didn't want him to suffer like that. Besides, I wanted to do something for him, give him something, and I couldn't think of anything else.

I called the hospital chaplain. He refused, saying, "I cannot baptize a baby unless I know for certain that it will be raised in a Catholic home." I had not specified that he be given to Catholics. I'd said, "I don't care if they're Jewish, just as long as they're good parents." I called Father Granville, who taught philosophy at my college. He refused, too. I said, "What if the baby dies and ends up in

purgatory?" Father Granville said I should've thought of that sooner. I became frantic.

My mother got on the phone. She called every parish priest in the vicinity. They all said no. But my mother was a great believer in "going straight to the top." She marched down to the Pro-Cathedral and demanded to speak to the bishop. She told him the story. He defended his priests' decisions; he said it was a matter of individual conscience. My mother said she wasn't leaving until something was done. The bishop sighed and arranged the papers on his desk. Finally he looked up and said that, under the circumstances, perhaps something could be arranged. He said, "Perhaps the most important thing is to put this poor young woman's mind to rest. I'm sure she's been through enough already."

Within hours, a priest arrived to perform the baptism. He was the eighty-year old chaplain of the hospice across the street; I don't remember his name, just that his eyes were kind and he looked very happy. He said to me, "I haven't had the opportunity to baptize a child for years; this is a great honour. What would you like your baby to be named?" "Paul Vincent McNamee." Paul for my brother. I don't really know where Vincent came from.

The priest and my mother left for the hospital chapel. I walked slowly round my room, trying to get some strength back in my legs. A nurse knocked on the door. I kept the door of my room closed so that I didn't have to listen to the cries

of other women's babies. The nurse said, "Your baby's being taken to the chapel to be baptized." "Yes," I said. "Well, aren't you going?" "No." "You're not going to your own baby's baptism?" "No." She looked me up and down, shook her head and left.

After seven days, the surgeon who did the Caesarean came by to see me. He shook my hand and asked me how I was. I said, "Fine." He inspected the incision and complimented himself on what a fine job he'd done. I laughed even though it hurt. He asked me what I thought of his work. I told him I'd never looked at it. He pretended to be offended and insisted I take a peek. With him there beside me, I could look. The mark was much lower down than I'd imagined. A fine red line, that was all that was left. I told him he'd done a fine job and I meant it. He said, "I knew you wouldn't want great big scars all over your stomach." Then he told me I could go home.

My mother had already returned to Port Hope. She said she couldn't leave my father alone any longer. She told me to buy a girdle to wear until my abdomen shrank back to normal. I'd thanked her for coming, but I was relieved to see her go. Her presence reminded me of the wrongness of what I'd done. I felt as though there was nothing in the world I could ever do to make things better. We would always remember this. We would never speak of it, but the shame would still be there.

I gathered up my few things and called a taxi. I went the long way down to the front door so I wouldn't have to walk past the nursery. I stood outside smoking. The air was cold. Everything looked bright and sharp-edged. I felt weak and empty. Numb.

When I got home, no one else was there. The apartment felt unfamiliar. I sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window. I got up and went into my bedroom. Everything had been left exactly the way it was when we'd left for the hospital. The stop-watch on my desk. Lisa's chart for the contractions. Empty mugs and plates scattered around. The record player was still on. I turned it off and sat down at my desk. I stared out the window.

I don't remember anything about the next three weeks. My roommates told me afterwards that all I did was sleep and stare out the window. I rarely spoke. I never left the apartment. When people came over to visit, I shut my bedroom door. Lisa finally asked me if I was planning to go back to classes and apparently I said to her, "What's the point?"

That was when Lisa went to tell Gerry Plum that there was something wrong with me. Gerry was one of my professors that year, a social work professor. He was the only person at the university who'd ever acknowledged the fact that I was pregnant. After class one day, he said to me, "I see that you are pregnant and I also notice that you appear to be single. If there is ever anything I can do for you, just let

me know." I had been embarrassed but pleased, and whenever I saw him after that, Gerry always asked me how I was feeling. I came to think that he had a warm and good-sized heart.

Gerry arrived at our apartment one afternoon when I was home alone. I made him tea and listened to him from a distance. He insisted we go out for a walk. He said to me, "Mary, have you considered going to see your baby?" I turned suddenly and looked at him. His words seemed like the first ones I'd actually heard in a very long time. "It's too late," I said. "No," he said. "You have five days left."

Then Gerry told me a story. He told me about the birth of his last child. Gerry was in the delivery room with his wife. The doctor handed the baby to him. He held the baby in his arms. Something went wrong. The baby died moments later. Gerry said he was so terribly glad afterwards that he'd seen this little baby, had that one chance to hold him in his arms. He carried the baby's image with him through his grief. It helped to fill the hole inside him. Gerry turned to me and said, "Maybe it's like that, Mary. Maybe it would be a huge dose of pain now but less of a empty void later on."

I didn't respond. I went home and sat in the kitchen. My mind was racing. I got up and paced. Lisa came home. She knew right away something was different. I said to her, "I'm thinking of going to see the baby." Lisa put her books down and plugged in the kettle. "Well, I think you should.

We've all seen him. You're the only one who hasn't." She told me how every evening when they left my room, she and Anne and Nancy and Moira walked down the hall to the nursery to where the baby lay. They stood there for a while, smiling and waving at him through the glass wall, even when he was asleep. They wanted to go into the nursery, to pick him up and talk to him, but they weren't allowed. They did all this and kept it to themselves.

That did it. My mother had seen this baby right after the operation; Doctor Baxter had brought him to the door of the operating room and placed him in my mother's arms. My friends had visited this baby seven evenings in a row. I was the only one who hadn't seen the baby I'd given birth to. That was it. I was going.

Mrs. Rankin was not pleased to hear from me. She asked me if I knew what I was doing. She told me it would be too painful. She asked me if this meant I was going to change my mind. I said to her, "I want to see the baby. And I'm bringing a friend. And I don't want you there." I hadn't even considered changing my mind, keeping him after all. I just wanted to know he really existed. I just wanted to touch him.

Three days later, Gerry and I drove north out of London with a social worker I'd never met before. She was pleasant and quiet. I sat in the front seat watching the fields and noting the names of the towns and villages we passed through:

Ilderton, Ailsa Craig, Parkhill. I wondered why the baby had been taken so far away. Three quarters of an hour later we arrived at a farmhouse where an older woman greeted us without a smile. I stood awkwardly in the kitchen, wondering what I was supposed to do. Then the woman led me through the living room into a small bedroom. In a crib lay a baby. The woman lifted him up and handed him to me. I'd never held a baby before. I raised my arms hesitantly. Then the woman understood that I did not know what to do. She said, "Like this," and folded my arms around him, with one of my hands supporting his head. Then she left the room.

My legs felt weak, so I carefully lowered myself onto a black vinyl couch that sat underneath a tall white-curtained window. I looked down at the baby in my arms. His milky blue eyes wandered around, as if avoiding mine. He had his father's red hair. Apart from that, he looked like any other baby I'd seen. It seemed to me that I should have been able to recognize him immediately, that he should have felt more familiar. It seemed impossible that this baby I held in my arms had lived inside my body for nine long months.

The woman came back in and said my time was up, the baby needed to lie down. She never referred to him by name, but then neither did I; I knew the name I'd chosen for him had already vanished. I could have told that woman right then and there to go to hell, I could have walked right out of that house with that baby in my arms and no one could have

stopped me. But I didn't. I quietly went back into the kitchen and sat down to tea and lemon cake. We all sat there eating while the baby lay alone in the other room. There was general talk about the weather, the upcoming election. I was silent, watching the woman whose job it was to take care of the baby I'd had.

Piercing wails erupted suddenly from the small bedroom, high-pitched sobs that filled the kitchen. No one moved. The woman kept talking. I looked at the social worker. She was looking at the woman. I wanted to get up but I couldn't. I was frozen to my chair, paralyzed. My legs were pinned in place by the belief that this baby was no longer mine, that I had no right to go to him when he cried. Blood rushed in my ears and my chest grew tight. I could hear a scream building in my head. I put every ounce of energy I had into my eyes and looked at Gerry. He got up instantly and went across the kitchen to the small bedroom. Then the woman followed him. The cries ceased. Gerry told me later that he had never seen such panic and terror in anyone's eyes as he had that moment in mine.

We left the farmhouse. I couldn't say good-bye. Instead I prayed words inside my head. Let him be all right. Let his new parents love him. Let him grow up healthy and happy. Simple sentences, over and over. We drove back through the same fields and towns to London. Gerry and the social worker talked while I watched the passing landscape

with interest, feeling as if the weight that had been sitting on top of me for weeks had slightly shifted. What I remember most is Gerry describing some crazy film named Harold and Maude. I was grateful for his small talk. It made things seem normal, pinned them down in their proper place. He said something else, too, an expression I had never heard before. He said that this was certainly "a red-letter day in his diary". I didn't understand what he meant, but I knew he had the colour right.

I thought then that the whole ordeal was over. I'd seen the fruit of my labour; I had an image for what the purpose of the last eleven months had been. I thought that now I could get on with my life, put all this behind me, begin the process of forgetting. I didn't know then that even if the mind forgets, the body doesn't. I didn't know then that I would never be able to undress without noticing the scars this baby left, that I would never be able to make love again without first explaining those marks. I didn't know then that my eyes would be drawn to every red-haired baby, child, teenager I saw. I didn't know then that I would always carry this child with me, his absence like a presence in my heart.

I worked hard at forgetting. But whenever I went to Mass, tears ran down my face on the way to Communion. When I lay down at night, I saw that baby's tiny face and wondered if I'd done the right thing. Perhaps I could have cared for him. Perhaps I could have done as good a job as anyone else.

Perhaps I'd made a terrible mistake. People told me to think instead of how happy I'd made his new parents, that couple who'd despaired of ever having a child. People told me I'd get over this loss when I had more children of my own.

Tom did his best to make sure I couldn't forget. I ran into him a couple of months after the baby was born. I told him I'd had a boy, but I didn't say he had red hair. Tom's face was a mask, still and expressionless. I turned to walk away and he burst out, "You had no right to do that, you know, cutting me off like that. Now everyone thinks I'm a jerk." I kept walking. After that, Tom would show up drunk at my place and stand out in the middle of the street, yelling "whore," "slut." He threw stones and empty beer bottles up at my window. It never occurred to me to call the police. I felt guilty. Sometime Tom would show up at parties I went to, and when he saw me he would point his finger at me accusingly and scream obscenities until my friends shoved him out the door. Sometimes he tried to kick me. He kept this up for three years, until I left London and moved two thousand miles away. Years later, I learned that he'd finally snapped, assaulted a co-worker on the job for no apparent reason and been taken away screaming to a psychiatric hospital. It took me years to believe that it wasn't my fault, that he'd probably been headed in that direction for a long time.

I went off the rails too. I drank heavily. I did a lot of drugs. I managed to keep going to school, and after that to keep working, though a few times I came close to losing jobs on account of my drinking. I spent my twenty-sixth birthday in the hospital, suffering from pancreatitis, a condition usually associated with middle-aged men who've been drinking heavily for decades. Two doctors told me that if I continued drinking the way I had been, I wouldn't live to see my thirtieth birthday. I had already had two bouts of hepatitis. I had been hospitalized for one emotional breakdown and had suffered many others. Anxiety and terror were familiar states.

At the time I never saw what I was doing as self-destructive, and I never connected any of it with losing a baby. Perhaps it was because after a few months nobody ever mentioned the fact that I'd had a baby, so that it often seemed to me as if the whole thing had never happened. Perhaps it was because none of us expected any long-term consequences. Even now I have trouble linking my later desperation with that loss and the shame I'd learned to carry while I was pregnant. Maybe I would have gone off the rails anyway; I'd been drinking and doing drugs long before I got pregnant. All I know is that after the baby was gone, I did things I hadn't done before. I drank until I lost consciousness. I took the drugs intravenously. I slept with so many men I lost track of them all. I hit myself, hard,

and screamed abuse at myself out loud. I cut my skin with razor blades. I never said no.

Even while I was trying to obliterate my pain and myself, I never forgot that baby. Every February 3rd, I thought of a birthday cake, and a red-haired boy with the light of candles in his eyes, his parents smiling at him. I marked his years with my wondering. Is he talking yet? Is he walking now? Does he like school? Is he loved? Does he have friends? And always I prayed that the difficult labour had not left any lasting damage.

On his tenth birthday, a couple of years after I quit drinking, I finally spoke to him. Not in person, just out loud to myself. I lit ten candles, placed them around my living room, and turned off all the lights. I spoke to him for hours, telling him how sorry I was that I couldn't have kept him, telling him why I'd had to give him up, telling him the story of his birth. I told him how my life had been since then, and that it was probably better for him that he hadn't been living it with me. I told him all the hopes I held for him.

On his sixteenth birthday, I went to a Parent Finders meeting. It had taken me six months to get up the nerve to go. I had told friends privately over the years that I'd had a baby and given him up, but this was different. This was a public declaration in front of strangers. That evening, I found myself sitting in a high school classroom surrounded by

sixty other people, all in various stages of looking for someone they'd been separated from. Seated in front of me was a young man with a shaved head and one leg, who bit his nails nervously. Beside me sat a woman in her forties, scratching her head and leafing through reams of letters on government letterhead. She was looking for her daughter. Behind me was an elderly woman, carefully dressed and clutching her handbag. She was looking for her sisters, whom she'd lost track of when they were orphaned as young girls.

I learned that night that it was not advisable to look for a child who was still under age. I learned that some people found their children easily while others searched fruitlessly for years. I listened to stories of reunions, all between birth mothers and their daughters. The mothers all spoke of a weight being lifted from them, of finally being freed of chronic depression. The daughters spoke of their delight in discovering physical similarities between themselves and their birth mothers. Everyone spoke of the peace that came with finally having questions answered.

I entered my name and personal information on the registry; that was all I could do. I just wanted to know that if he ever looked for me, he would have some chance of success. When I left that building, I felt tall and light. I walked down the steps of the school and paused to reach up, to touch the branch of an overhanging pine tree. I said to myself, "Some day I'll find you."

On his eighteenth birthday, I finally called him "my son." Until that day, I had only been able to refer to him as "the baby I had." I'd never been able to utter the word "my." I'd been told that I was not really his mother, that he was not really my son. I'd been told it was better to think that way, but it had never worked. Seventeen years after he left my body, I said "my son." I said it over and over. My baby. My son. My child. A whole world lay within that small possessive pronoun. When I said "my son," I felt him as my flesh and blood, and I felt myself as his mother.

On his nineteenth birthday, I started writing this story. The first morning I wrote, I began to feel chilled and nauseous. I wondered if I was coming down with a flu. My bowels cramped. I wondered if I had a touch of food poisoning. I ended up in bed, feeling absolutely miserable and wishing I could vomit. The next day I felt quite fine. But that evening, when I resumed writing, the symptoms returned. It took me three days to recognize the connection between this writing and feeling ill, to realize how deeply words can alter bodily reality.

That's how it's been, writing this. While I write, I grow chilled to the very marrow of my bones. I keep the hot water bottles filled and hop in and out of warm baths. My stomach and bowels cramp and heave. My legs tremble. My shoulders slide forward and my chest caves in. I slump in my

chair and cannot will myself to straighten up even though my back aches. My whole body grows rigid with tension until I finally break down and weep. Huge gasping sobs that leave me longing to die or convinced I am about to die. Afterwards, I lie on my bed completely exhausted, wordless.

He's nineteen now. I still haven't looked for him. I have forms that I could send away to the Ontario government to obtain non-identifying information from his adoption file. I've been told that this can take up to two years. But I don't send them off. I'm not ready yet. I'm still too afraid of what I might find. He could be handicapped or dead. He could have been adopted by abusive parents. He could have been raised an obnoxious redneck. He might not want to see me. He might be angry at me.

Perhaps for now, this is enough. This retrieval of the past, this salvaging of memory. This lifting of events out of the unreal time-place they were stuck in. This sifting through and sorting out, this placing of word after word onto paper, this documenting, this honouring of even the smallest details. This assertion that this is a story worth telling. This telling of my story to myself, a simple telling: this is how it was, this is what happened. This gathering together of details and memories that had been scattered like lost children. This giving birth to a story I can keep.